

HOW DID WE GET THE BIBLE?

A **MANNAHOUSE** RESOURCE



INTRODUCTION

Christians maintain that the Bible is the inspired Word of God. However, they often accept this fact without a basic understanding of how we received the Bible.

Although God was the divine architect and author of the sacred scriptures, He chose to use a variety of selected individuals, over a 1600-year period, to communicate God's revelation to mankind through both the Old and New Testaments. We call this unique revelation the Holy Bible.

This booklet offers a concise yet comprehensive examination of how we got the Bible. It carefully explains the origins, translation, preservation, and gradual evolution of the Word of God.

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WHAT IS THE CANON?

The word “canon” means “measuring rod”, and refers to the inspired collection of books in both the Old and New Testaments regarded as scripture. It conveys the idea that certain books “measure up” to the divine standards required of sacred scripture.

The gradual process of determining which books met the requirements unfolded over many centuries. **However, it should be stressed that the church did not create the canon or confer inspiration upon the various books of the Bible.**

As one scholar noted, “The church no more gave us the New Testament canon than Sir Isaac Newton gave us the force of gravity. God gave us gravity . . . and similarly He gave us the New Testament canon, by inspiring the individual books that make it up.”¹ The church simply recognized and received those books that were already inspired from their creation and bore the distinctive marks of divine authority, authorship, and authenticity.

1 James J. Parker: **God Speaks to Man**, pg. 81

THE GUIDELINES FOR DETERMINING SACRED CANON

Specific rules have been developed for determining which writings meet the requirements for sacred canon:

1. **Does the book possess a definite prophetic and inspirational quality?**
In short, does it manifest a “Thus saith the Lord”?
2. **Was the book written by a reputable prophet, authored by an apostle, or someone intimately associated with an apostle?**
3. **Was it accepted, collected, distributed, and read by God’s people** either in the Old Testament period or New Testament Period?
4. **Does its contents and message harmonize with the standards of sound biblical teaching?**
5. **Does it possess dynamic, life-transforming power?**
6. **Was it endorsed and accepted by future generations of believers,** such as the early church fathers?

The 66 books comprising our present Bible have met these standards.

THE OLD TESTAMENT CANON

The Old Testament canon was completed with the Book of Malachi and closed around the year 425 B.C. The Jewish Tal-mud, which contains ancient Jewish beliefs, confirms this fact: "After the later prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, the Holy Spirit departed from Israel."¹ Josephus, the Jewish historian (37-100 A.D.), also acknowledged this in his writings.²

The Old Testament canon accepted by the Jews and later by Christ and the early church is exactly the same as the 39 books in our present Protestant Bibles, even though the number of books and sequential order differs (i.e., the Jews combine I and II Kings and place Chronicles last instead of Malachi). The Jews unconditionally accepted the Hebrew Old Testament books as sacred scripture because they met the strict requirements demanded of canon.

1 Babylonian Talmud: **Sanhedrin, VII-VIII, 24.**

2 Josephus, Flavis: **Contra Apion I**

THE ACCURACY OF OLD TESTAMENT TEXTS

Because the Jews held such an intense reverence towards their sacred scriptures, they strove to preserve the absolute accuracy of their scriptures with an almost fanatical discipline. They followed an intricate system of safeguards which governed the copying and transcribing of the sacred scrolls against “scribal slips”. Each letter was checked and rechecked. If a single mistake was found, the entire page was destroyed. So exacting and meticulous were the copyists that they counted the exact number of verses, words, and individual letters. They even measured the proscribed space between each letter and calculated the middle word and letter in each book. They constantly compared and crosschecked new copies with these calculations to make sure they agreed. If there was any discrepancy or miscount, they searched until they located the error and corrected it.

Because of God’s persevering power and the scribes’ reverent attention to editing and detail, the accuracy of the Old Testament has been protected and preserved. As one scholar noted, **“It may safely be said that no other work of antiquity has been so accurately transmitted.”**¹

¹ Green, William H: **General Introduction to the Old Testament**, pg. 21.

EXISTING OLD TESTAMENT MANUSCRIPTS

Until the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls, the oldest existing manuscript copies of the Hebrew text were dated around 900 A.D., making a substantial time gap of 1300 years between them and the completion of the Old Testament canon in 400 B.C. **Surprisingly enough, the very reason why we do not possess the original firsthand manuscripts (called “autographs”) or more older manuscript copies than we do can be directly attributed to the extreme care of the Jewish copyists to preserve the accuracy and purity of the scriptures. Whenever a manuscript showed signs of age or was damaged or accidentally defaced, it was promptly buried or burned.**

Prior to the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls, the oldest Hebrew manuscripts were the product of the Jewish Massoretes (500–900 AD.), who diligently supervised the transcribing of sacred scriptures. The text they completed is called “The Massoretic Text”, the oldest of which is the Cairo Codex (A.D. 895). Other Hebrew texts include: The Codes of the Prophets of Leningrad (A.D. 916), The Aleppo Codex (A.D. 900+), The British Museum Codex (A.D. 950), Codex Babylonicus Petropolitanus (A.D. 1008), and the Reuchlin Codex of the Prophets (A.D. 1105).

THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS

The discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls in 1947 by a Bedouin shepherd boy in caves west of the Dead Sea **provided the strongest evidence to date concerning the accuracy of the Old Testament texts.**

The leather scrolls are dated between 200 B.C. and 68 A.D. One of the scrolls is a complete copy of the Book of Isaiah, making this manuscript 1000 years older than any previously possessed copy. The similarities between it and the Massoretic copies of the 9th century A.D. are striking and overwhelmingly substantiate the accuracy of the oldest manuscript copies of the Massoretic Texts in evidence.

The Dead Sea scrolls conclusively demonstrate the extraordinary diligence and precision of the Jewish copyists of the sacred scriptures over a thousand year period, and supply us with tremendous confidence in the reliability of our biblical texts.

THE APOCRYPHAL BOOKS

The word “apocrypha” means “hidden or concealed. It refers to a set of books which do not meet the criteria of canon. These books include I and II Esdras, Tobit, Judith, The Rest of Esther, The Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, The Song of the Three Hebrew Children, The History of Susanna, Bell and the Dragon, The Prayer of Manasses, and I and II Maccabees. Though the Roman Catholic Church officially endorsed most of these books at the Council of Trent in 1546 and includes them in their Bible versions, Protestants reject them as inspired canon. Some of these books contain material of literary merit and historical value but must be rejected as inspired canon for the following reasons:

- 1. None of the apocryphal writers claim divine inspiration, and some openly disclaim it (i.e. I Mac. 4:46; 9-.27; II Mac. 2:23; 15:38).**
- 2. No Hebrew canons include them, though the more liberal Greek Septuagint includes them.**

- 3. Jewish scholars at the Canonical Council of Jamnia (90 AD.) did not recognize them.**
- 4. The Apocryphal books contain numerous historical, factual, and geographical inaccuracies and anachronisms,** as well as blatant myths and folklore.
- 5. They teach doctrines which are false and foster practices which are inconsistent with the accepted standards of biblically inspired teaching** (i.e. they justify suicide and assassination, and teach praying for the dead).
- 6. Jesus and the New Testament writers never quoted from the Apocrypha,** even though there are hundreds of quotes and references from almost all of the canonical books of the Old Testament.
- 7. Many of the early church fathers spoke out against the Apocrypha** such as Origen, Jerome, Tertullian, Cyril of Jerusalem, and Athanasius.
- 8. No canon or council of the Christian church for the first four centuries recognized or endorsed them as inspired.**
- 9. Luther and the Reformers unanimously rejected their canonicity.**
- 10. Many Roman Catholic scholars through the Reformation period rejected the Apocrypha as well.**

THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

During the first century, the various books comprising our New Testament were written, copied, and circulated among Christians scattered throughout the Roman Empire. Along with these, other false scriptures and apocryphal books were also written and circulated, sometimes with the falsely attached name of an apostle. These counterfeit scriptures are called “pseudepigraphic writings” (false writings), and contain numerous errors and doctrinal heresies. **Due to the spread of these fake epistles, the need for an officially sanctioned canon of the New Testament became increasingly essential.** The gradual process of selection began early in the history of the Christian church.

Though the 27 books now comprising our New Testament canon were not finalized overnight, the general consensus and near universal recognition increasingly leaned in favor of these 27 books.

Over the next three centuries, reputable church fathers gradually endorsed the inspiration of all of our New Testament canon as well as accepting our present Old Testament canon.

Towards the end of the second century, the “Muratorian Canon” was published in Rome and contained all of the New Testament canon except Matthew, Mark, Hebrews, James and I and II Peter.

As early as 367 A.D., Athanasius of Alexandria gave us the earliest list of New Testament books exactly like our present New Testament. Shortly after, both Jerome and Augustine defined the canon as 27 books.

By the fourth century, the canon was generally established. With the Councils of Hippo (A.D. 393) and Carthage (A.D. 397), the church at large accepted all of the 27 books forming our New Testament. **Since that time, there has never been any serious challenge to the divine validity of these works by either addition or subtraction.**

ACCURACY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT MANUSCRIPTS

The overall manuscript evidence supporting the Bible's accuracy is overwhelming. There are over 5,800 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, over 10,000 of the Latin Vulgate, and at least 9,300 other early versions. A total of over 25,000 manuscript copies or portions of the New Testament are in existence today.

Compared to other ancient writings such as Homer's Iliad or Caesar's Gallic Wars, **the Bible has more manuscript evidence supporting its reliability and accuracy of translation than any ten pieces of ancient literature combined.**¹ So conclusive is the evidence supporting this fact that one prominent scholar noted, "To be skeptical of the resultant text of the New Testament books is to allow all of classical antiquity to slip into obscurity, for **no documents of the ancient period are as well attested bibliographically as the New Testament.**"²

The exacting accuracy of manuscript translation and transmission, as well as the massive amount of manuscript material in existence gives strong support to its divine authorship, accuracy, and preservation over the last 1900 years.

1 Josh McDowell, **Evidence that Demands a Verdict**, pp. 19, 39-46

2 John W. Montgomery, **History and Christianity**, pg. 29.

THE MANUSCRIPT FAMILIES

Contemporary translations of the New Testament are derived from specific groupings of manuscripts, depending upon the version. These families consist of complete manuscripts or fragments derived from a common source or geographical region **Some of these families date from an earlier period and are marginally more reliable. However, extensive textual criticism has shown that there is an amazing similarity between manuscript texts with only the slightest differences which have not jeopardized or contradicted any doctrinal or rule of faith.**

These Families include the “Byzantine Family of Manuscripts” or “Antioch Manuscripts” from which the “Textus Receptus” (received text) is derived and which forms the basis of the King James Bible. Many scholars like Pickering, Sturtz, Hills and others now believe that the Greek Antioch manuscripts starting from about 100 A.D. which now number over 5800 are as old or older than the Alexandrian manuscripts of 44. These Greek Antioch manuscripts however make up the KJV of 1611. Other families are the “Alexandrian Family” which includes such

important manuscripts as the Codex Vaticanus (325 - 50 A.D.), and the Codex Sinaiticus (350 A.D.), which forms the basis of nearly all current Bible versions except the King James version; the “Western Family” from the area of the Western Mediterranean (200 A.D.); and the “Caesaran Family” of manuscripts.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE ENGLISH BIBLE

Until 670 A.D., virtually the only widely-used translation of the Bible was the Latin Vulgate version, translated in the fourth century by Jerome. After that date, portions of the Bible were translated into old English until 1382 when a complete English translation of the Latin Bible was published. It was called the “**Wycliffe Bible**” because of the instrumental efforts of John Wycliffe to produce it. It had a wide influence even though it was written sixty years before the invention of the printing press.

Though Wycliffe was one of the first Reformers, many English Reformers followed his example by translating, publishing, and distributing the Bible for the benefit of the common man. Many were executed for their efforts by the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England. Other English versions which followed in rapid succession were:

1. **In 145 A.D.**, started Peshitta (Syrian)
2. **In 157 A.D.**, The Old Latin (Italia)
3. **In 1525**, William Tyndale published the **“Tyndale Bible”** which was an English version of the New Testament translated from the Greek instead of Latin texts.
4. **In 1535**, Miles Coverdale published the **“Coverdale Bible”** which was a complete Bible.
5. **In 1537**, King Henry VIII issued a license for the publication of a New English Bible called the **“Matthew’s Bible”** edited by John Rogers, a friend of Tyndale.

6. **In 1539**, Miles Coverdale published the “**Great Bible**” which was a revision of the Matthew’s Bible. Also in that year, Richard Taverner published a revision of the Matthew’s Bible called the “**Taverner’s Bible**”. It was the first English Bible printed in London, but was not very popular.
7. **In 1560**, the “**Geneva Bible**” was published and was the first to use the chapter and verse arrangement found in our contemporary versions and to italicize words not found in the Greek and Hebrew manuscripts.
8. **In 1568**, nine English bishops collaborated with Matthew Parker of Canterbury to publish the “**Bishop’s Bible**” which was a revision of the Great Bible.
9. **In 1582**, an English translation of the Latin Vulgate was published for Roman Catholics in England and became known as the “**Douay-Rheims Version**” or simply the “Douay version”. It was inferior to other English versions in existence because of its numerous translation mistakes.
10. **In 1611**, “**The King James Version**”. The English translation from the Greek Antioch manuscripts was done by scholars from Oxford, Cambridge and Westminster. Each change was reviewed at least 14 times by each group before being finalized.

THE KING JAMES VERSION

To solve the intense bickering among English Christians concerning the best Bible version, King James I authorized the translation of a new Bible in 1604, commonly referred to as the “King James Bible”.

54 scholars were divided into six groups (47 actually participated), and each was assigned a different section of the scriptures to translate, with the whole group reviewing and refining each section, followed by a final review committee. They had more manuscript resources available than any other previous Bible version. They used the four existing Massoretic texts for the Old Testament and the Greek Textus Receptus, revised by Beza (an associate of Calvin), for the New Testament.

After six years of painstaking work and attention to accuracy, the King James Version was published in 1611. **Though it has gone through several revisional improvements (1629, 1638, 1762, and 1769), it is still, after three centuries, the most widely read, circulated, and quoted Bible in existence.** Its majestic style and literary beauty has endeared itself to countless millions, and ensures it continuing popularity for decades to come.

THE KING JAMES BIBLE COMPARED WITH OTHER MODERN VERSIONS

In recent times some of the popularity of the King James Bible has begun to diminish in the face of new translations based upon certain Greek manuscripts which were not available when the King James Version was written. These manuscripts are primarily from the "Alexandrian Family", and include the Codex Sinaiticus and the Codex Vaticanus, which form the basis of such modern translations as the Revised Standard Version (RSV) and the New American Standard Bible (NASB).

Though the Textus Receptus includes a larger number of existing manuscript texts (80-90%), most modern scholars prefer relying upon the older texts. However, good men are on both sides of the fence concerning whether the older manuscript texts are more reliable than the Textus Receptus.

Some textual scholars have found so little difference between the existing manuscripts, and since the minor discrepancies have never affected a single doctrinal issue or rule of faith, the controversy over which current Bible translation is the best boils down to a matter of personal preference.

THE KING JAMES VERSION

While there are many versions currently available, not all possess equal quality or value. We have recommended four of the most popular, readable, and reliable versions in print.

- 1. The Kings James Version (KJV, 1611)** – The accuracy of translation is good, and the text is extremely faithful to the Greek texts available when it was translated. The beauty in language is excellent and considered by many to be unsurpassed. Many prefer the time-tested style, majestic expression, and cadence of this version. The major drawback is its archaic vocabulary which contains many words which are obsolete and now different in meaning.
- 2. The New King James Version (NKJV, 1982)** – The textual basis of this work still follows the Textus Receptus of the 1611 version. However, it endeavors to update the clarity of language for the modern reader. It still retains the beauty of style like the original King James Version, but the combination of the old with the newer language improvements promises to make this version a popular translation in the coming years.

3. **New American Standard Bible (NASB, 1971)** – This translation is based on the older manuscripts not available when the King James Version was written. Its accuracy is excellent because it closely adheres to the original texts. Its readability is also good. However, because it is an exacting, literal translation, it doesn't achieve the literary beauty and naturalness in style that the King James Version possesses.
4. **New International Version (NIV, 1978)** – The accuracy of this translation is good and adheres more closely to the Greek than most former translations. It doesn't have the beauty of the King James Version, but it does have a freshness in contemporary style and language. Its clarity in expression is excellent.

NOTE: Those translations which have not been included may have redeeming value, but were not recommended because of language limitations, biased marginal notes, the inclusion of Apocryphal books, or liberal theological interpretations. These include the New English Bible, the Revised Standard Version (RSV), the Jerusalem Bible (Roman Catholic), and the New American Bible (Roman Catholic).

TRANSLATIONS VERSUS PARAPHRASES

Contemporary Christianity has the advantage of having many Bible versions to select from. However, some versions are translations of the ancient texts, while others are paraphrases. **There is an important difference between a translation and a paraphrase. A Bible translation is an attempt to communicate in one language what another language, such as Greek or Hebrew, literally says, while a paraphrase says something in different words from those which the author originally used.**

Christians should recognize this important distinction and use paraphrases with a measure of caution. Because paraphrases represent an interpretation of what the Bible actually says, it can occasionally reflect the doctrinal bias of the interpreter. **Paraphrases should be used as a supplementary tool to sound Bible study and not be relied upon as the primary source of personal Bible familiarity. Some of the recommended paraphrases available include: The Amplified Bible, the Passion Bible and The Message Bible.** Another recommended translation which is often viewed as a paraphrase is the Modern Language Bible.

CONCLUSION

The divine preservation and unfolding evolution of the Bible is one of the most miraculous events in human history. The proof of its divine authorship and construction can be seen through the preserving providence which God supervised over the copying, collecting, transmission, and protection of the sacred texts over a 3,500 year period.

This booklet has addressed this miraculous process in order to provide Christians with a fundamental understanding of how we got our modern Bible. For a more extensive coverage of this subject, we recommend reading **“Evidence That Demands a Verdict”** (Chapters 2, 3 and 4) by Josh McDowell, and **“A History of the English Bible”** by Jonathan Underwood. We also recommend that you read the Mannahouse booklets entitled “Your Bible and You” and “Is the Bible the Word of God?”

For a quick overview of this booklet, please re-read the boldly printed words on each page.

NOTES



CAMPUS LOCATIONS

PORTLAND CAMPUS

9200 NE Fremont St
Portland, Oregon 97220

TIGARD CAMPUS

12244 SW Garden Pl
Tigard, Oregon 97223

MILL PLAIN CAMPUS

14311 SE Mill Plain Boulevard
Vancouver, Washington 98684

EUGENE CAMPUS

89780 N Game Farm Road
Eugene, Oregon 97408

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WWW.MANNAHOUSE.CHURCH **503.255.2224**



**SCAN FOR SUNDAY
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WRITTEN BY: WILLIAM KIMBALL

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