

How We Got the Bible

From The MacArthur Study Bible - John MacArthur

Considering the human tendency to doubt God, it is common for a person to be skeptical of the authenticity of the Bible, considering its bold claims to be the only, true Word of God. Many minds have struggled with valid questions, such as these:

- Where did the Bible come from?
- Who wrote the Bible—God or man?
- Has Scripture been protected from human tampering over the centuries?
- How close to the original manuscripts are today's translations?
- How did the Bible get to our time and in our language?
- If the Scriptures were written over a period of 1500 years (about 1405 B.C to A.D. 95), passed down since then for almost 2,000 years, and translated into several thousand languages, what prevented the Bible from being changed by the carelessness or ill motives of men?

A study of the Scriptures alone settles all questions to the extent that someone need never be bothered by them again. Scripture gives this assurance.

Scripture's Self Claims

Take the Bible and let it speak for itself. Does it claim to be God's Word? Yes! Over 2,000 times in the Old Testament alone, the Bible asserts that God spoke what is written within its pages. From the beginning (*Gen. 1:3*) to the end (*Mal. 4:3*) and continually throughout, this is what Scripture claims

Passages in Scripture make powerful statements about the Bible, setting it apart from any other religious instruction ever known in the history of mankind. Its content marks it as "sacred" (*2 Tim. 3:15*) and "holy" (*Rom. 1:2*). The Bible claims ultimate spiritual authority in doctrine, correction, and instruction because it represents the inspired Word of Almighty God. Scripture asserts its spiritual sufficiency, so much so that it claims exclusivity for its teaching. (see *Is. 55:11; 2 Pet 1:3,4*)

God's Word declares that it is inerrant (*Ps. 12:6; 119:140; Prov. 30:5a; John 10:35*) and infallible (*2 Tim. 3:16,17*). In other words, it is true and therefore trustworthy. All of these qualities are dependent on the fact that the Scriptures are God-given (*2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet 1:20,21*), which guarantees its quality at the Source and at its original writing.

The Publishing Process

The Bible does not expect its reader to speculate on how divine qualities were transferred from God to His Word, but rather anticipates the questions with convincing answers. Every generation of skeptics has assailed the self-claims of the Bible, but its own explanations and answers have been more than equal to the challenge. The Bible has gone through God's publishing process in being given to and distributed among the human race. Its several features are discussed below.

Revelation

God took the initiative to reveal Himself to mankind (*Heb. 1:1*), sometimes through the created order, visions/dreams, or speaking prophets. However, the most complete and understandable self-disclosures were through the propositions of Scripture (*1 Cor. 2:6—16*). The revealed and written Word of God is unique in that it is the only revelation of God that is complete and that so clearly declares man's sinfulness and God's provision of the Savior.

Inspiration

The revelation of God was captured in the writings of Scripture by means of “inspiration.” ***“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God...” (2 Tim. 3:16).*** Peter explains the process, ***“...knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.” (2 Pet.1:20,21).*** Through the work of the Holy Spirit, the Word of God was protected from human error.

Canonicity

We must understand that the Bible is actually one book with one Divine Author, though it was written over a period of 1,500 years through the pens of almost 40 human writers. The Bible began with the creation account of ***Genesis 1—2***, written by Moses about 1405 B.C., and extends to the eternity future account of ***Revelation 21—22***, written by the Apostle John about A.D. 95. But this raises a significant question: how do we know which sacred writings were to be included in the canon of Scripture and which ones were to be excluded?

Over the centuries, three widely recognized principles were used to validate those writings that were divinely inspired. First, the writing had to have a recognized prophet or apostle as its author (or one associated with them, as in the case of Mark, Luke, Hebrews, James, and Jude). Second, the writing could not disagree with or contradict previous Scripture. Third, the writing had to have general consensus by the church as an inspired book.

Preservation

God anticipated man's and Satan's malice towards the Scripture with divine promises to preserve His Word. The very continued existence of Scripture is guaranteed in ***Isaiah 40:8***, ***“The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever” (see 1 Pet 1:25).*** This even means that no inspired Scripture has been lost in the past and still awaits rediscovery. The battle for the Bible rages, but Scripture has and will continue to outlast its enemies.

So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55: 11).

Transmission

Through the centuries the practitioners of textual criticism, a precise science, have discovered, preserved, catalogued, evaluated, and published an amazing array, of biblical manuscripts from both the Old and New Testaments. In fact, the number of existing biblical manuscripts dramatically outdistances the existing fragments of any other ancient literature. By comparing text with text, the textual critic can confidently determine what the original prophetic/apostolic, inspired writing contained. For example, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947—1956 (manuscripts that are dated about 200—100 B.C.), proved to be monumentally important. After comparing the earlier Hebrew texts with the later ones, only a few slight variants were discovered, none of which changed the meaning of any passage. Although the Old Testament had been translated and copied for centuries, the latest version was essentially the same as the earlier ones.

The New Testament findings are even more decisive because a much larger amount of material is available for study; there are over 5,000 Greek New Testament manuscripts that range from the whole testament to scraps of papyri which contain as little as part of one verse. A few existing fragments date back to within 25—50 years of the original writing. New Testament textual scholars have generally concluded that 1) 99.99 percent of the original writings have been reclaimed, and 2) of the remaining one hundredth of one percent, there are no variants substantially affecting any Christian doctrine.

Summing It Up

God intended His Word to abide forever (preservation). Therefore His written self-disclosure (revelation) was protected from error in its original writing (inspiration) and collected in 66 books of the Old and New Testaments (canonicity).

Through the centuries, tens of thousands of copies and thousands of translations have been made (transmission) which did introduce some minute error. Because there is an abundance of existing ancient Old Testament and New Testament manuscripts, however, the exacting science of textual criticism has been able to reclaim the content of the original writings (revelation and inspiration) to the extreme degree of 99.99 percent, with the remaining one hundredth of one percent having no effect on its content (preservation).

The sacred book which we read and obey deserves to unreservedly be called The Bible, since its author is God and it bears the qualities of total truth and complete trustworthiness that also characterizes its divine source.

Is There More To Come?

How do we know that God will not amend our current Bible with a 67th inspired book? Or, in other words, "Is the canon forever closed?" The most compelling text on the closed canon is the Scripture to which nothing has been added for 1,900 years.

For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book. (Revelation 22:18,19)

The Bible

This Book contains the mind of God, the state of man, the way of salvation, the doom of sinners, and the happiness of believers. *Read it to be wise, believe it to be saved, and practice it to be holy.* It contains *light to direct you, food to support you, and comfort to cheer you.* It is the traveler's map, the pilgrim's staff, the pilot's compass, the soldier's sword, and the Christian's charter. It should fill the memory, rule the heart, and guide the feet. Read it slowly, frequently, and prayerfully.

For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe. (1 Thessalonians 2:13)

Introduction to the Bible

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The Bible is a collection of 66 documents inspired by God. These documents are gathered into two testaments, the Old (39) and the New (27). Prophets, priests, kings, and leaders from the nation of Israel wrote the Old Testament books in Hebrew (with two passages in Aramaic) The apostles and their associates wrote the New Testament books in Greek.

The Old Testament begins with the creation of the universe and closes about 400 years before the birth of Jesus Christ.

The history of the Old Testament flows in the following order:

- * Creation of the universe
- * Fall of man
- * Flood over the whole earth
- * Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Israel)—fathers of the chosen nation
- * The history of Israel
 - Exile in Egypt—430 years
 - Exodus and wilderness wanderings—40 years
 - Conquest of Canaan—7 years
 - Era of Judges—350 years
 - United Kingdom—Saul, David, Solomon— 110 years
 - Divided Kingdom—Judah / Israel—350 years
 - Exile in Babylon—70 years
 - Return and rebuilding the land—140 years

The details of this history are explained in the 39 books, which are divided into 5 categories:

The Law—5 (Genesis—Deuteronomy)
History— 12 (Joshua-Esther)
Wisdom—5 (Job—Song of Solomon)
Major Prophets—5 (Isaiah—Daniel)
Minor Prophets—12 (Hosea—Malachi)

After the completion of the Old Testament, there were 400 years of silence, during which God did not speak or inspire any Scripture. That silence was broken by the arrival of John the Baptist, who announced that the promised Savior had come.

While the 39 Old Testament books focus on the history of Israel and the promise of the coming Savior, the 27 New Testament books focus on the person of Christ and the establishment of the church. The four gospels give the record of His birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension. Each of the four writers views the greatest and most important event in history, ***the life of Jesus Christ***, from a different perspective. ***Matthew*** looks at Him through the perspective of ***His kingdom***; ***Mark*** through the perspective of ***His servanthood***; ***Luke*** through the perspective of ***His humanness***; and ***John*** through the perspective of ***His deity***.

The Book of Acts tells the story of ***the impact of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ***— His ascension, the coming of the Holy Spirit, the birth of the church, and the early years of gospel preaching by the apostles and their associates.

The 21 epistles (or letters) were written to churches and individuals to teach about the person and work of Jesus Christ and how to live and witness until He returns.

The New Testament closes with Revelation, which begins by addressing the current church age and culminates with the prophecies of Christ's return, when He will establish His earthly kingdom, bring judgment on the ungodly, and bless His believers. Following Christ's millennial reign will be the last judgment, in which all believers of all time will enter the ultimate eternal glory prepared for them, and all the ungodly will be consigned to eternal punishment in hell.

The one, unifying theme unfolding throughout the whole Bible is that for His own glory, God has chosen to create and gather to Himself a group of people who will live in His eternal kingdom, to praise, honor, and serve Him forever, and through whom He will display His wisdom, power, mercy, grace, and glory. To gather His chosen ones, God must redeem them from sin. The Bible reveals God's plan for this redemption, from its origin in eternity past to its completion in eternity future. All covenants and eras are secondary to the one continuous plan of redemption.

There is one God, who is Creator and Lord. The Bible is one book. It offers one plan of grace, recorded from its initiation in Creation, through its fulfillment in Christ, to its completion in Revelation. The Bible is the story of God's redeeming His chosen people for His glory.

As God's redemptive purposes and plan unfold in Scripture, five recurring motifs are constantly emphasized:

- the character of God
- the judgment for sin and disobedience
- the blessing for faith and obedience
- the sacrifice of the Lord Savior for sin
- the glory of the coming kingdom

Everything revealed in both the Old Testament and New Testament falls into these five categories. As one studies Scripture, it is essential to grasp these recurring themes which shape all of the passages, and to recognize that what is introduced in the Old Testament is also clarified in the New Testament.

1. The Revelation of the Character of God

Above all else, Scripture is God's self-revelation. In that self-revelation is established His standard of absolute holiness because of His holy character. From Adam and Eve, the standard of righteousness was established and is sustained through the last page of the New Testament.

2. The Revelation of Divine Judgment for Sin and Disobedience

Scripture repeatedly deals with the matter of man's sin. Of the 1,189 chapters in the Bible, only four do not involve a fallen world: the first two and the last two—before the Fall in Eden and after the creation of the new heaven and new earth. The rest is the chronicle of the tragedy of sin.

In the Old Testament, God showed the disaster of sin—starting with Adam and Eve to Cain and Abel, the relentless record shows the continual devastation produced by sin. In the New Testament, the tragedy of sin becomes clearer as Jesus issues a call to repentance. Disobedience is even more flagrant than in the Old Testament because it involves the rejection of the Lord Jesus Christ in the brighter light of New Testament truth.

3. The Revelation of Divine Blessing for Faith and Obedience

Scripture repeatedly promises wonderful rewards, in this life and in eternity to those who trust and seek to obey God. In the Old Testament, God showed the blessings of repentance, faith, and obedience—as seen in the lives of Abel, the patriarchs, the remnant in Israel, and even Gentiles who believed, such as the people of Nineveh (*Jonah Chap.3*). In the New Testament, God showed the blessedness of redemption for those who responded to the preaching of John the Baptist, Jesus, and the apostles. To all those and to all who will believe through all of history there is blessing promised in this world and the world to come.

4. The Revelation of the Savior and His Sacrifice for Sin

This is the heart of both the Old Testament and the New Testament. The promise of blessing is dependent upon grace and mercy for the sinner. Such forgiveness is dependent upon a payment of sin's penalty to satisfy God's holy justice. That requires a substitute—one to die in the sinner's place. God's chosen substitute—the only one who qualified—is Jesus. Salvation is always by the same gracious means, whether during Old Testament or New Testament times. When any sinner repents, convinced he has no power to save himself from the judgment he deserves, and pleads for mercy; God grants him forgiveness. God then declares him righteous because Christ's sacrifice covers him. In the Old Testament, God justified sinners that same way, in anticipation of Christ's atoning work. Therefore, there is a continuity of grace and salvation through all of redemptive history. Having fulfilled all righteousness by His perfect life, Christ fulfilled justice by His death. Thus God Himself atoned for our sin, at a very high price. That is what Scripture means when it speaks of *salvation by grace*.

5. The Glory of Christ and His Kingdom

As in any book, how the story ends is the most crucial and compelling part—so with the Bible. Redemptive history is controlled by God, so as to culminate in His eternal glory. Scripture notes several very specific features of the end planned by God.

The Old Testament repeatedly mentions an earthly kingdom ruled by the Messiah, accompanied by the salvation of Israel, the salvation of Gentiles, the renewal of the earth from the effects of the curse, and the bodily resurrection of God's people who have died. Finally, the Old Testament predicts the creation of a new heaven and new earth—which will be the eternal state of the godly— and a final hell for the ungodly. In the New Testament, these features are clarified and expanded. The King will return in glory, bringing judgment, resurrection, and His kingdom for all who believe. The Lord will reign in the renewed earth, exercising power over the whole world and receiving due honor and worship. Following that kingdom will come the dissolution of the renewed, but still sin-stained creation, and the subsequent creation of a new heaven and new earth—which will be the eternal state of those who believe.

To understand these five themes reveals the glorious pattern of the Bible. With these in mind, the Bible will unfold, not as 66 separate documents, or even two separate testaments—but *as one book, by one divine Author*, who wrote it all with one overarching theme.

My prayer is that the magnificent and overwhelming theme of the redemption of sinners for the glory of God will carry every reader with captivating interest from beginning to end of the story. *Christian—this is your story. It is from God for you—about you. It tells what He planned for you, why He made you, what you were, what you have become in Christ, and what He has prepared for you in eternal glory.*