

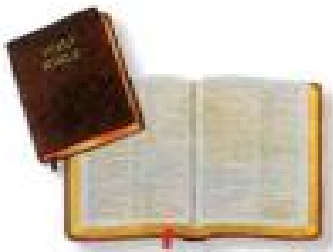
HOW WE GOT OUR BIBLE

The Bible contains two major sections known as the Old Testament and the New Testament. The books of the **Old Testament** were written over a period of about **1,000 years** in the Hebrew language, except for a few selected passages, which were written in Aramaic. The Old Testament tells of the preparation that was made for Christ's coming.

The **New Testament** was written over a period of about **100 years**. The original language in which it was written was Greek. This portion of the Bible tells of Christ's coming, His life and ministry, and the growth of the early church.

The English word testament normally refers to a person's will, the document which grants property to those who will inherit it after the owner's death. But the meaning of testament from both the Hebrew and the Greek languages is "covenant." Thus, the two collections that make up the Bible can best be described as the books of the old covenant and the books of the new covenant.

The old covenant is the covenant sealed at Mount Sinai in the days of Moses. By this covenant, the living and true God, who had delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, promised to bless them as His special people. They were also to worship Him alone as their God and to accept His law as their rule for life (Ex 19:3-6; 24:3-8).



The new covenant was announced by Jesus as He spoke to His disciples in the upper room in Jerusalem the night before His death. When He gave them a cup of wine to drink, Jesus declared

that this symbolized "the new covenant in My blood" (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25).

Between the times of Moses and Jesus, the prophet Jeremiah foresaw a day when God would make a new covenant with His people. Under this new covenant, God would inscribe His laws on the hearts of people rather than on tablets of stone (Jer 31:31-34). In the New Testament, this new covenant of which Jeremiah spoke is identified with the covenant inaugurated by Jesus (Heb 8:6-13).

These movements are actually two phases of one great act through which God has revealed His will to His people and called for their positive response. The second covenant is the fulfillment of what was promised in the first.

In the form in which it has been handed down among the Jewish people, the **OLD TESTAMENT**, or Hebrew Bible, contains three divisions: **the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings**. The **Law** consists of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy; this section of the Old Testament is also known as the PENTATEUCH. The **Prophets** fall into two subdivisions: the former prophets (Joshua, Judges, First and Second Samuel, and First and Second Kings) and the latter prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Book of the Twelve Prophets- Hosea through Malachi). The rest of the books are gathered together in the **Writings**: Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra/Nehemiah (counted as one book), and First and Second Chronicles.

The arrangement of the Old Testament with which readers today are most familiar has been inherited from the pre-Christian Greek translation of the Old Testament (the SEPTUAGINT) - an arrangement which was also followed by the later Latin Bible (the Vulgate). This arrangement has four divisions: the Pentateuch, the historical books, poetry, and prophecy.

The **NEW TESTAMENT** opens with five narrative books- the four **gospels** and the **Acts** of the Apostles. The gospels deal with the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The Book of Acts continues the story of the development of the early church across the next 30 years. Acts serves as a sequel to the gospels

in general; originally it was written as a sequel to the Gospel of Luke in particular.

Twenty-one **letters**, or epistles, follow the historical narratives. Thirteen of these letters bear the name of the apostle Paul as writer, while the remaining eight are the work of other apostles or of authors associated with apostles. The last book in the New Testament, the Revelation of John, portrays through visions and symbolic language the accomplishment of God's purpose in the world and the ultimate triumph of Christ.

AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE. The Bible is the **written record** of the Word of God which came to prophets, apostles, and other spokesmen, and which "became flesh" in Jesus Christ. Christians believe **Jesus Christ was the Word of God in a unique sense**. Through Jesus, God communicated the perfect revelation of Himself to mankind. From the life of Jesus, we have a picture of what God is really like.

For Christians the authority of the Bible is related to the authority of Christ. The Old Testament was the **Bible that Jesus used**-the authority to which He made constant appeal and whose teachings He accepted and followed. When Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane and led away to His execution, He submitted with the words, "The Scriptures must be fulfilled" (Mark 14:49). He saw His mission in the world as a fulfillment of the predictions of the Old Testament.

The New Testament presents the record of Jesus' life, teachings, death, and resurrection; a narrative of the beginning of the Christian church with the coming of the Holy Spirit; and the story of the extension of the gospel and the planting of the church during the following generation. It also contains the written teachings of Jesus' apostles and other early Christians who applied the principles of His teaching and redemptive work to their lives.

God has revealed Himself through His **mighty acts** and in the **words** of His messengers, or spokesmen. Both complement each other. In the Old Testament record, none of the mighty acts of God is emphasized more than the EXODUS - God's deliverance of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage. As He delivered His people, God repeatedly identified Himself as their redeemer God: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you

out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before Me" (Ex 20:2-3).

If they had been delivered with no explanation (through the Bible), the nation of Israel would have learned little about the God who redeemed His people. The Israelites might have guessed that in such events as the plagues of Egypt and the parting of the waters of the Red Sea, some supernatural power was at work on their behalf. But they would not have known the nature of this power or God's purpose for them as a people.

God also communicated with His people, the nation of Israel, through Moses, to whom He had already made Himself known in the vision of the burning bush. God instructed Moses to tell his fellow Israelites what had been revealed to him. This was **no impersonal** force at work, but the God of their ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In fulfillment of His promises to them, God was acting now on behalf of their descendants.

In communicating with His people, God revealed both His identity and His purpose. His purpose was to make the Israelites a nation that would bless other nations through the birth of the Messiah.

The prophets were God's primary spokesmen to the people of Israel in Old Testament times. But they were not His only messengers. Priests and sages, or wise men, were other agents through whom God's will was made known. The teachings of many of these messengers are preserved in the Bible.

In the New Testament, Jesus was God's perfect revelation of Himself-He was the divine Word in human form. His works of mercy and power portrayed God in action, especially His supreme act of sacrifice to bring about "the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom 3:24). His teaching expressed the mind of God.

The words and acts of Jesus also proclaimed the meaning and purpose of His works. For example, His act of casting out demons "with the finger of God" (Luke

11:20) was a token that the kingdom of God had come upon them. He also declared that His death, which he interpreted as the fulfillment of prophetic Scripture (Mark 14:49), was "a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

HOW WAS THE BIBLE PRESERVED OVER THE YEARS? Many of the messages in the Bible were circulated in spoken form. The stories of the patriarchs were passed from generation to generation by word of mouth before they were written. The messages of the prophets were delivered orally before they were fixed in writing. Narratives of the life and ministry of Christ were repeated orally for some time before they were put in written form. But the Bible owes its preservation to the fact that all these oral narratives were eventually reduced to writing. Just as God originally inspired the Bible, He has used this means to preserve His Word for future generations.

The first person in the Bible to write anything down was Moses. (Ex 17:14). From that time until the end of the New Testament age, the writing of the many books and parts of the Bible continued.

Before the original documents disappeared, they were copied. These copies of the original writings are the texts on which current translations of the Bible are based.

The process of copying and recopying the Bible has continued to our time. Until the middle of the 15th century A.D., all the copying was done by hand.

The older handwritten copies of Bible texts are called manuscripts. Early manuscripts for the books of the Bible were written on papyrus or skin.

The ancient papyrus manuscripts which have been discovered were found in the dry sands of Egypt and other arid places. Great quantities of inscribed papyri have been recovered from the Egyptian sands during the last hundred years dating from the period shortly before and after the beginning of the Christian era, about A.D. 30 AD. A few scraps of papyri containing ancient texts of the Bible have been among the recovered manuscripts.

The skins of animals proved to be a much more durable writing material than papyrus. Many different writing materials were

manufactured from such skins. Some were a coarse form of leather. Others were subjected to a special refining process, emerging as a writing material known as parchment. Vellum, another valued writing material, was made from calf skin. Some of the most **important** manuscripts of the Bible were written on vellum.

THE CANON OF THE BIBLE. The word canon means a "rod"-specifically, a rod with graduated marks used for measuring length. This word refers to the list of individual books that were eventually judged as authoritative and included as a part of the Old Testament (*the Law, the Prophets and the Writings*) and the New Testament.

From the beginning, the Law was accepted, even if it was not always obeyed. Evidence of its acceptance would include Moses' reading of "the Book of the Covenant" to the people at Mount Sinai and the people's response, "All that the Lord has said we will do, and be obedient" (Ex 24:7).

Further evidence of acceptance of the Law includes the discovery of the "Book of the Law," probably the Book of Deuteronomy, in the Temple of Jerusalem during King Josiah's reign and the religious reform which followed (2 Kings 22:8-23:25). Also, following the return of the Jewish people from the Babylonian Captivity, "the Book of the Law of Moses" was read to the people of Jerusalem under Ezra's direction. This book became the constitution of their new nation (Neh 8).

The second division of the Old Testament accepted by the Jewish people was the Prophets. The prophets' words were preserved from the beginning by their disciples, or by others who recognized the prophets as messengers of God. In general, their words were written shortly after they were spoken, for their authority as God's messengers came before their widespread acceptance by the Jewish people.

The words of the prophets were not regarded as authoritative because they were included in the Old Testament; they were included because they were considered to be authoritative.

The "Bible" which Jesus used was the Hebrew Old Testament. The Old Testament was also the Bible of the early church. It was the Old Testament as fulfilled by Jesus. Christians

interpreted the Old Testament in the light of His person and work.

The works and words of Jesus were first communicated in spoken form. The apostles proclaimed the gospel by word of mouth. Paul taught the believers orally in the churches which he founded when he was present. But when he was absent, he communicated through his letters.

Quite early in its history, the church felt a need for a written account of the teachings of Jesus. His teachings did provide the basis for the new Christian way of life. But the church grew so large that many converts were unable to rely on the instructions of those who had heard and memorized the teachings of Jesus. From about A.D. 50 AD onward, more than one written collection of sayings of Jesus circulated in the churches. The earliest written gospel, the Gospel of Mark, was written about A.D. 64 AD.

Two collections of Christian writings circulated among the churches at the beginning of the second century. One of these was the gospel collection. The other collection was the letters of the apostle Paul. The letter to the Hebrews was added to this second collection at an early date.

Early Christians continued to accept the Old Testament as authoritative. So, alongside Moses and the prophets, they had these early writings about Jesus and letters from the apostles, who had known Jesus in the flesh.

When officials of the early church sought to make a list of books about Jesus and the early church which they considered authoritative, they retained the Old Testament, on the authority of Jesus and His apostles. Along with these books they recognized as authoritative the writings of the four gospels, or biographies on the life and ministry of Jesus; the 13 letters of Paul; and letters of other apostles and their companions. The gospel collection and the apostolic collection were joined together by the Book of Acts, which served as a sequel to the gospel story, as well as a narrative background for the earlier epistles.

The **primary standard** applied to a book was that it must be written either by an apostle or by someone close to the apostles. This guaranteed that their writing about Jesus and the early church would have the authenticity of an **eyewitness** account. As in the earliest phase of the church's existence, "the apostles' doctrine"

(Acts 2:42) was the basis of its life and thought. The apostolic writings formed the charter, or foundation documents, of the church.

None of the books written after the death of the apostles were included in the New Testament. The fact that they were written later ruled them out for consideration among the church's foundation documents. Only the apostolic writings carried ultimate authority. They alone could be used as the basis of the church's belief and practice.

Behind the Bible is a thrilling story of how God revealed Himself and His will to human spokesmen and then acted throughout history to preserve His Word and pass it along to future generations. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, "**The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever**" (Isa 40:8).

(from Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Copyright (c)1986, Thomas Nelson Publishers)

By the middle of the second century a Christian New Testament had come into existence. However, the complete acceptance of all of the books in our present NT canon was dated from the councils (meeting of early church leaders) of Laodicea (about A.D. 363 AD) and Carthage (A.D. 397), which confirmed the catalogs of Cyril of Jerusalem, Jerome, and Augustine, recognized early church spiritual fathers.

(from The New Unger's Bible Dictionary.)

Bad men could never have written so holy a book, and good men would never have written it if it were an imposture.

Nothing but superhuman inspiration could have turned them to write so spiritually and so at variance with all their early prejudices.

(from Fausset's Bible Dictionary.)

For more detail, you can retrieve an article CANON of the NT from the International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia from our website. We can also email you this article.