

The Bible: A Panoramic View of Its History, Origin, Compilation and Canonization

Introduction and Existing Perceptions about the Bible

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The Bible is an interesting book. It has generated a lot of debate as to its origins, veracity and authority. Some dismiss it as an out of date book of fairy tales, folklore or mere imaginary stories from the distant past. This group thinks and holds that the Bible has no place in a technologically advanced age where things have been explained by Science unlike when the Bible was first written. Others think the Bible is a terrible and dangerous book not worth reading because it has a potential of driving someone insane. This group strongly advocates for the outlawing of the Bible because of its inexplicably strange captivating power about it capable of derailing entire civilizations, keeping its' victims in needless bondage.

But there is another group that neither fears the Bible nor respect it. They approach it as any other literary work written by clever mere mortals with a sinister motive aimed at controlling the world. They think it is a book that had its time, though for now may be out of step with the times, but none the less a helpful historical reference volume. This group rejects the idea of inspiration or total cohesion of the Bible. The said pundits further assert or claim that the Bible is a patch work resulting from many individual's work over time compiled and then canonized as scripture. This group further holds that the Bible is self-contradictory at times and may mislead the naive reader. Thus, according to this school of thought, the Bible must be read with utmost caution so that one does not lose their objectivity or independence. This explains partly why some people will not submit to its authority claiming that since the original autographs are lost, the Bible is essentially unreliable and its evidence circumstantial. It is in effect a corrupted version with various editions along the way, so they claim. We would include the JEDP theory supporters as well as the Jesus Seminar Liberal Theologians in this bracket (Funk, Dewey 2015; Wright 1999).

The Truth Behind Bible Background

But what is the truth about the Bible? Is it indeed a fictitious work of pious men of the past? Is its message irrelevant for the times? What can we learn or conclude from these accusations?

To aid us answer these and many other questions, we summon the writings of at least three authorities among them: Fred Ragland, Hampton J Keathley, John H Gerstner, Greg Bahnsen, J.P. Moorland and Mike Vlach who have done extensive background research as to how we got our Bible.

The Bible is said to be the word of God and held so by many well meaning Evangelicals. It is also held to be inspired and thus without error (Gerstner Keathley 1997; Young, 1963). It holds together and never contradicts itself. Although it is not a text book to prove scientific fact, it none the less makes accurate statements relating to the world viewed from the human eye. Thus, it is said to be scientifically accurate and never at variance with true science. Unlike Evolution, the Bible starts with God and declares that He created the world from nothing, no pre-existing material (i.e. ex-nihilo) but simply by the word of His mouth. The scriptures as we have them today were not always so available as we possess them today. They were originally written on different materials such as animal skin, parchments, papyrus, bones or any other materials that were available to communicate truth. Thus, it was not possible to have one volume of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation as we now have it today. In short, it was impossible to have it in one volume at one given location due to its cumbersomeness and bulkiness. Thus, people scattered across the world had parts of this *Biblia* but with time, these were collected and compiled into one Library. It is amazing that the Bible has over 30 different independent authors that wrote in separate locations but drafted similar thoughts and ideas about God, not at any point contradicting each other! This alone proves the inspiration of the volume. We further say that the Bible was written predominantly in two major languages (Hebrew and Greek) although parts of Daniel and Ezra were written in Aramaic. Thus, in the original languages (and monographs), the scripture is said to be inspired and inerrant unlike later translations where the text may possibly have been corrupted with some minor errors here and there. We here refer to minor typos or losses in translations not change in thought or teaching. The Old Testament is primarily in Hebrew written over a 1,000-year period while the New Testament was written in just over 45 years (i.e. AD 45-90) and yet amazingly preserved for our generation. Additionally, we need to mention that The New Testament was written in Koine Greek, a form of street language version of Greek extant and spoken throughout the Roman empire, relics of Alexander the Great's ancient empire. The Old Testament was at some point translated into the Greek (i.e. the Septuagint, by the 72 Jewish scholars?) while at a later stage, the entire Bible was translated by Jerome and others to Latin, giving us the Vulgate.

For a long time, some critics scorned at the Biblical Text claiming that since the original monographs were lost, the text they had at the time could not be reliable.

This was so because the oldest text the world had early in the 20th century was transcribed over nine hundred years after Christ (about 10 AD there about). These critics raised their horn for a long time and joined by the enemies of the cross but thanks to accidental archaeological discoveries of 1947, it changed the entire picture silencing all dissent. The said 1947 Dead Sea Scrolls were accidentally discovered by some shepherd boys that were herding livestock in the area near Qumran. For some reason, one of them decided to throw a stone into a cave that none of them had ever entered before, probably due to its pitch darkness. Surprisingly, a strange sound of breaking pottery sounded from the inside. They eventually went in to investigate and found the over 1,000 years old scrolls hidden in the pots! It was one of the greatest finds of all time and would open more doors of opportunity. The manuscripts thus discovered were compared with the available 1,000 year later copies and amazingly, there was completely no difference at all! No significant difference or deviation of any meaning, totally identical!

Scribe work

But how was the Bible copied given that it was a strenuous and tedious work? What we know is that the scribes were highly trained and meticulously careful people as far as the text was concerned. A kind of cultic reference and care about what they did. Firstly, they had a fear of God and ensured that whatever they did was as excellent as could be. Since they revered God, prior to handling the text, they ensured they bathed, washed their hands and meticulously wrote the text without any error. If even a word was wrongly written, the entire scroll was destroyed. Further, as the texts got older and tattered, they were immediately discarded and replaced by another one that was carefully copied from the older. This partly explains why the older texts do not exist today. But why did they do this? The reason is that they did not want God's image to be misrepresented or misunderstood. Only the very best was good enough.

More than that, they would physically counted the number or the letters and words across and below the text (vertically and horizontally) ensuring that the same numbers matched. This helped in retaining the accuracy of the text. Further, this also ensured that the text was clean, readable and clear. The down side to this approach is that there were very few texts generated or available at a given time.

With the passage of time however, the copies began to progressively increase and today, we have thousands of fragments or complete copies of the Old and New Testaments.

Bible Corpus, integrity and veracity

But how can we tell that the Bible texts referred to were correct? A number of ways. The first is that the Lord Jesus referred to them. It would appear that the Lord predominantly quoted from the Septuagint text when He spoke. Stephen is another (Acts 7 & 8). We may further ask, how was the Bible compiled from all those fragments scattered across the world?

For one thing, we cannot fully explain but what is amazing is that they were collated and brought together as one library (for the meaning of the word '*Bible*' is "books" or library). It must be stated that there were thousands of books on the market and many of them claiming inspiration but with time, different communities begun to recognize some as inspired over others. This recognition raised the status of the said books to the extent that when the Old Testament canon was to be settled, only those that were so recognized were included while rejecting others. Those rejected were assigned a "Useful" information status. We must also state that what was considered "Canonical" tended to vary from community to community but this difference was not much. While some had different sections of "Inspired" and "Uninspired" others did not show that distinction although they themselves knew what was inspired and which was just useful literature. Several sessions, sittings and groups sat to determine the Old Testament canon but by the Time Jesus walked the earth, the Old Testament corpus seems to have been settled. Many legends have been advanced as to what exactly happened at the time the Old Testament was agreed on but one or two things are certain however, the compilers of the Hebrew Bible were well versed in the Language and knew what was accepted as inspired and thus canonized. As for the New Testament, the final canon was not settled until much later. The earliest Christians suggested what they considered scripture which were debated by succeeding generations until a final set was arrived at. This was a protracted long winded business process but was worth it because different groups held different books as part of the New Testament. Some included the Apocryphal books as binding, authoritative and inspired while others rejected them. Jerome for instance rejected these books in his Latin Vulgate translation. Criteria were used to select the New Testament books which included: 1. Referred to the Lord 2. Was in agreement with the rest of scripture 3. Was written in the apostolic era, either by an apostle or one closely associated with them. There could have been other critical criteria but those points should suffice. Below is a list of the books in the agreed New Testament and their approximate date of authorship (Vlach 1999 p 16):

1. Matthew-AD 62-68
2. Mark-AD 62
3. Luke-AD 62
4. John-AD 80-90

5. Acts-AD 62
6. Romans-AD 55-57
7. I Corinthians- AD 54-56
8. 2 Corinthians- AD 55-57
9. Galatians-AD 48/49
10. Ephesians-AD 62
11. Philippians-AD 60
12. Colossians-AD 58-60
13. I Thessalonians-AD 50
14. 2 Thessalonians-AD 50
15. I Timothy-AD 64
16. 2 Timothy-AD 65-66
17. Titus-AD 64
18. Philemon-AD 62
19. Hebrews-AD 68 or before
20. James-AD 40-45
21. I Peter-AD 64
22. 2 Peter-AD 66
23. 1, 2 & 3 John-AD 90
24. Jude- probably end of first century
25. Revelation-AD 95

The succeeding generation such as the Apostolic and Church Fathers, along with other eminent saints quoted extensively from the epistles (and the gospels) to the extent that it is possible to reconstruct the entire New Testament from their writing. Theirs were almost word for word copying.

Translations and perceptions of them

Today, we have so many translations in many languages. What the problem is today is two-fold. Firstly, not everyone recognises the Bible as the inspired word of God even among some clergy men. Secondly, not all translations are as accurate or necessarily correct. For a long time, the King James version (KJV), or Authorised version (AV) stood as a land mark translation¹ for many years only to be dislodged by the popular New International Translation (NIV) in the 20th Century². Although the King James version was translated word for word from the best available Greek and Hebrew texts at the time³, it is more accurate than the NIV because the latter is a transliteration or a commentary of sorts⁴. The NIV was translated on a dynamic equivalence basis which aims at giving the approximate relevant meaning in a given contemporary context unlike a direct word for word translation. In that regard, the KJV is superior and more accurate in the main. However, the most accurate translation to date is the American Standard Bible (ASB)⁵ even surpassing the New KJV.

¹ Translated from the Textus Receptus. Vlach (p 58) affords us the following words he quoted from some source: "In 1516, Desiderius Erasmus published a Greek text which came to be known as the Textus Receptus. The Textus Receptus served as the basic guide for the translators of the King James Version. Being an excellent scholar, Erasmus printed a fine text, but he was only able to gather half a dozen Greek manuscripts for his initial work. Plus, the Greek manuscripts used in the Textus Receptus were from the inferior text-type known as "Byzantine." The Byzantine text-type represents a revision of the New Testament text made in the fourth century A.D. and later. It is also farther removed from the text of the first century than certain earlier text-types which have been distinguished in more recent times (Alexandrian, Western and Caesarean) (Bruce, *History of the English Bible*, p. 127)."

² For over 350 years, the KJV was the most popular as attested by Underwood as quoted by Vlach (p57): "The King James Version remains the most popular English Bible ever. Its classic language though difficult for some to understand today, has been communicating the will of God for over three and a half centuries. Its majestic style has been quoted, paraphrased, and imitated like no other. Its influence in Christian hymns is unmistakable. Although recent textual developments have shown some weaknesses, the King James Version will likely remain the most popular English translation for many years to come" (Underwood, p. 78)"

³ Lightfoot, as quoted by Vlach (p 58) seems to suggest that the Greek and Hebrew text manuscripts used in the KJV translation were inferior to other later discovered manuscripts such as the Dead Sea Scrolls. We quote Lightfoot verbatim: "The manuscript evidence available to the KJV translators was not as good as the manuscript evidence we have today. This is especially true with reference to the Greek text for the New Testament. The text underlying the King James [the Textus Receptus] was essentially a medieval text embodying a number of scribal mistakes that had accumulated through the years" (Lightfoot, pp. 137-38)."

⁴ Mike Vlach, quoting Underwood's words posts the following on p 58: "The King James Version of the Bible was based on the best Greek and Hebrew texts available. This contributed immeasurably to its worth, for most English Bibles had been translated from a Latin translation. Thus, the King James took English readers a full step closer to the original message. But that was over 350 years ago. Archeology has contributed much to Biblical studies since that time. And textual criticism has made some significant advances since then as well" (Underwood, p. 79)."

⁵ Mike Vlach comments on the NASB the following on p 60 (though Vlach seems to imply that the RSV was probably a superior translation over the KJV): "In the New American Standard Bible, evangelical scholars have attempted to update and clarify the ASV. The NASB's New Testament translators mainly used Nestle's improved text based on Westcott and Hort; but they also referred to some of the papyrus manuscripts and recent studies of the New Testament text. Generally, the Old Testament committee used Kittel's Hebrew text" (The Bible Almanac, p. 79). The NASB capitalizes personal pronouns that refer to deity. The NASB has been praised for being accurate and literal and criticized for not being contemporary."

Conclusion

Thus, we have seen that the Bible has a very long, winding but interesting history. It is one worth pursuing to gain an accurate understanding and appreciation. We should never lose focus nor let grass grow over this ancient historical path. That a book could be written by so many independent authors in different generations, location and ages is indeed a marvel. It can only be the finger of God that ensured His sacred word was preserved and passed on to us. Let us treasure this pearl encapsulated in one volume. "*Holy Bible book divine*," quipped an ancient hymn-writer many years ago, may we also in a similar spirit sing!

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