RESOURCES · BIBLE STUDY

How the Bible Came to Be

Inspired by God, Written by Men · 66 Books · About 1,500 Years

66 Books
39 Old, 27 New Testament

About 40 Writers
Moved by the Holy Ghost

1,500 Years
c. 1446 B.C.–A.D. 95

3 Languages
Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek

TIMELINE

Timeline of the Bible

1 c. 1446–1406 B.C. · Exodus 24:4

Moses Writes the Law

Genesis to Deuteronomy, written in the wilderness.

2 c. 1000 B.C. · 2 Samuel 23:1–2

David's Psalms

The sweet psalmist of Israel writes many of the Psalms.

3 c. 605–536 B.C. · Daniel 9:2

Exile in Babylon

Daniel and Ezekiel write; Daniel reads Jeremiah's book.

4 c. 430 B.C. · Malachi 4:5

Old Testament Complete

Malachi, the last prophet; then four hundred silent years.

5 c. 250 B.C.

The Septuagint

The Hebrew Scriptures are translated into Greek in Alexandria.

6 c. A.D. 30 · Luke 24:44

Jesus Confirms Them

Jesus teaches that all the Scriptures speak of Him.

7 c. A.D. 45–95 · John 14:26

New Testament Written

Apostles and their companions write the 27 books.

8 A.D. 367

Athanasius's List

The earliest list of exactly our 27 New Testament books.

9 A.D. 393–397

Hippo and Carthage

Church councils confirm the books long received.

10 c. 1382

Wycliffe Bible

The first complete Bible in English, copied by hand.

11 1611

King James Version

The English Bible quoted on this site.

12 1947

Dead Sea Scrolls

Ancient copies confirm the Old Testament text.

KEY VERSE

"For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost."

2 Peter 1:21 (KJV)

Who Wrote It and Which Books

WRITTEN BY MEN

The Men God Used

About forty men wrote the Bible over some fifteen hundred years, on three continents, in palaces, prisons, deserts and fishing towns. Here are twelve of them.

LAWGIVER

Moses

Raised in Pharaoh's court; wrote the five books of the Law.

EXODUS 24:4

SHEPHERD AND KING

David

Wrote many of the Psalms.

2 SAMUEL 23:1–2

KING

Solomon

Wrote Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon.

1 KINGS 4:32

PROPHET

Isaiah

Saw the Lord high and lifted up, and foretold the coming Saviour.

ISAIAH 6:1

HERDMAN

Amos

A herdman and gatherer of sycomore fruit, called to prophesy.

AMOS 7:14–15

CAPTIVE

Daniel

Taken to Babylon as a youth; served kings and saw visions.

DANIEL 1:6

CUPBEARER

Nehemiah

Cupbearer to a Persian king, then builder of Jerusalem's walls.

NEHEMIAH 1:11

TAX COLLECTOR

Matthew

Left the tax office to follow Jesus; wrote the first Gospel.

MATTHEW 9:9

FISHERMEN

Peter and John

Galilean fishermen who became apostles and eyewitnesses.

2 PETER 1:16

PHYSICIAN

Luke

"The beloved physician"; wrote Luke and Acts after careful research.

COLOSSIANS 4:14

TENTMAKER

Paul

A Pharisee turned apostle; wrote thirteen letters, some from prison.

ACTS 18:3

BROTHERS OF THE LORD

James and Jude

Jesus' half-brothers, who believed after He rose.

GALATIANS 1:19

BOTH AT ONCE

Inspired by God, Written by Men

God did not set the writers aside. Luke researched, Paul reasoned, David sang, and each man's style shows. Yet the Holy Spirit so carried them along that every word they wrote is exactly what God intended. That is why the Bible is fully the word of men and fully the Word of God, without error in all it teaches.

> *"All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works."*
>
> 2 Timothy 3:16–17 (KJV)

THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Old Testament: 39 Books

The Old Testament was written mostly in Hebrew from about 1446 to 430 B.C. Our English Bibles group its 39 books in five parts.

5 THE LAW

Genesis – Deuteronomy

Creation, the fathers, the exodus and God's Law, written by Moses.

12 HISTORY

Joshua – Esther

Israel in the land, the kings, the exile and the return.

5 POETRY AND WISDOM

Job – Song of Solomon

Songs, prayers and wisdom for life with God.

5 MAJOR PROPHETS

Isaiah – Daniel

The longer books of the prophets (and Lamentations).

12 MINOR PROPHETS

Hosea – Malachi

Twelve shorter books of prophecy, ending with Malachi.

39 IN ALL

The Same Books Jesus Read

Nothing added and nothing missing from the Scriptures of Jesus' day.

The Same Books in the Hebrew Order

The Jewish Bible holds exactly the same books, counted as 24 (for example, 1 and 2 Samuel are one book and the twelve Minor Prophets are one) and arranged in three parts. Jesus named all three in Luke 24:44.

TORAH

The Law

The five books of Moses.

"THE LAW OF MOSES"

NEVI'IM

The Prophets

Joshua to Kings, and Isaiah to the Twelve.

"THE PROPHETS"

KETUVIM

The Writings

Beginning with Psalms and ending with Chronicles.

"THE PSALMS"

THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament: 27 Books

The New Testament was written in Greek from about A.D. 45 to 95 by apostles and their close companions. Its 27 books fall into five groups.

4 GOSPELS

Matthew – John

The life, death and resurrection of Jesus, from eyewitnesses and those who knew them.

1 HISTORY

Acts

The church is born and the gospel spreads from Jerusalem to Rome.

13 PAUL'S LETTERS

Romans – Philemon

Letters to churches and to pastors and friends.

8 GENERAL LETTERS

Hebrews – Jude

Letters to believers everywhere, by Hebrews' writer, James, Peter, John and Jude.

1 PROPHECY

Revelation

Jesus' revelation to John of things to come and His final victory.

27 IN ALL

The Apostles' Witness

The writings God gave through Jesus' chosen witnesses.

How the Books Were Recognized

THE CANON

How the Books Were Recognized

The church did not make any book Scripture; God’s inspiration did. God’s people recognized His books by questions like these.

1

Is It from God’s Messenger?

Was it written by a prophet, an apostle, or a close companion of the apostles, such as Mark with Peter or Luke with Paul?

“built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets”

EPHESIANS 2:20

2

Is It True to the Faith?

Does it agree with the rest of God’s Word and with the gospel the apostles preached?

“though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you … let him be accursed.”

GALATIANS 1:8

3

Was It Received by the Churches?

Was it read and used as Scripture by churches everywhere from the beginning, not just in one place?

“cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans”

COLOSSIANS 4:16

4

Does It Carry God’s Authority?

Does it speak with the life-changing power that only God’s own Word has?

“For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword”

HEBREWS 4:12

WHAT “CANON” MEANS

A Measuring Rod

“Canon” comes from a Greek word for a measuring rod or rule. The canon is the set of books that measure everything else, because they come from God. The church did not stand over the Bible to judge it. It bowed under the Bible and received it.

WITNESSES

Early Witnesses and Church Councils

Long before any council met, church leaders were quoting the New Testament books as God’s Word. Here is how the record grows.

c. A.D. 95

Clement of Rome

His letter to Corinth quotes or echoes many New Testament books.

c. A.D. 110

Ignatius and Polycarp

Disciples of the apostles who quote the Gospels and Paul’s letters.

c. A.D. 170

Muratorian List

The oldest surviving list of New Testament books, naming most of them.

c. A.D. 180

Irenaeus

Teaches that there are four Gospels, no more and no fewer.

c. A.D. 250

Origen

Quotes nearly every New Testament book as Scripture.

c. A.D. 325

Eusebius

His Church History shows almost all 27 books received everywhere.

A.D. 367

Athanasius

His Easter letter lists exactly our 27 New Testament books.

A.D. 393

Council of Hippo

A North African council confirms the 27 books.

A.D. 397

Council of Carthage

Confirms the same list, already long in use.

A common myth says the Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325) chose the books of the Bible. It did not. Nicaea met to affirm that Jesus is fully God, and it made no list of books.

NOT SCRIPTURE

What About the Apocrypha?

The Apocrypha is a group of Jewish books written mostly between Malachi and the birth of Jesus. They are not inspired by God, so they are not part of the Bible. They may be read for history, such as the story of the Maccabees, as long as we remember that they are not God’s Word and may contain errors, while the Bible is without error.

1

Never in the Hebrew Bible

The Jews, to whom God gave the Old Testament, never counted these books as Scripture.

2

Never Quoted as Scripture

Jesus and the apostles quote the Old Testament often, but never cite the Apocrypha as God’s Word.

3

Written When No Prophet Spoke

They come from the silent years after Malachi; 1 Maccabees itself says there was no prophet in Israel.

4

Errors and Contradictions

They contain historical mistakes and teachings that disagree with Scripture.

5

Set Apart Early

Jerome, who translated the Latin Bible, said they were not to be used to establish doctrine.

6

Not Inspired

Some later Bibles printed them, the King James Version of 1611 in a separate section between the Testaments. They have never been part of God’s Word.

The books usually included are 1 and 2 Esdras, Tobit, Judith, additions to Esther, the Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus (Sirach), Baruch, additions to Daniel, the Prayer of Manasses, and 1 and 2 Maccabees.

Manuscripts and the English Bible

COPIED WITH CARE

The Manuscripts

The original writings were copied again and again by hand. God used faithful scribes to preserve His Word, and no other ancient book is as well preserved.

SCRIBES

A Ready Scribe

Ezra and the scribes after him copied and taught the Law with great care.

EZRA 7:6

c. 250 B.C.

The Septuagint

The Greek Old Testament, made in Alexandria and used across the Roman world.

c. 250 B.C.–A.D. 68

Dead Sea Scrolls

Found in 1947: parts of every Old Testament book except Esther.

c. 125 B.C.

The Great Isaiah Scroll

A complete Isaiah, a thousand years older than earlier known copies, yet almost identical.

A.D. 500–1000

The Masoretic Text

Jewish scribes who counted every letter to guard the Hebrew text.

c. A.D. 125

A Piece of John

A small papyrus of John 18, copied within a few decades of John's writing.

5,800+

Greek Manuscripts

Greek New Testament manuscripts, plus thousands in Latin and other early languages.

c. 2,000

Compare Homer

Homer's Iliad, the next best preserved ancient book, survives in fewer than 2,000 copies.

1516

The Printed Greek Text

Erasmus's Greek New Testament, the basis of Tyndale's and the King James New Testament.

FROM SCROLLS TO YOUR BIBLE

The Bible in English

For centuries ordinary English people could not read the Bible in their own language. Here is how that changed, often at great cost.

c. 1227

Chapters Added

Stephen Langton divides the Bible into the chapters we still use.

c. 1382

John Wycliffe

His followers complete the first whole Bible in English, from the Latin.

c. 1455

The Printing Press

Johannes Gutenberg prints the Bible; copies no longer take years to make.

1526

William Tyndale

The first printed English New Testament from the Greek. Martyred in 1536.

1535

Miles Coverdale

The first complete printed English Bible.

1551 · 1560

Verses Numbered

Robert Estienne numbers the New Testament verses; the Geneva Bible brings verses into English.

1611

King James Version

About fifty scholars in six companies complete the Authorized Version.

1769

The Standard KJV

The Oxford edition whose spelling most King James Bibles follow today.

Today

Every Tongue

The Bible, in whole or in part, is now in thousands of languages.

For the English translations made since 1611 and how they compare, see our Bible Translations page.

Why You Can Trust It, and Key Themes

FOR TODAY

Why You Can Trust Your Bible

The Bible in your hands is the Word God gave. Here are six reasons to read it with confidence.

1

Jesus Trusted It

The Son of God treated every word of Scripture as true.

"and the scripture cannot be broken"

JOHN 10:35

2

Prophecy Fulfilled

God foretold events long before they happened.

"Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done"

ISAIAH 46:10

3

Written by Eyewitnesses

The apostles wrote what they saw and heard.

"but were eyewitnesses of His majesty."

2 PETER 1:16

4

Faithfully Preserved

Thousands of copies show God has kept His Word.

"For ever, O LORD, Thy word is settled in heaven."

PSALM 119:89

5

One Story

Forty writers tell one story that centres on Jesus Christ.

"He expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning Himself."

LUKE 24:27

6

It Changes Lives

God's Word still turns hearts to Him today.

"The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul"

PSALM 19:7

> *"Heaven and earth shall pass away, but My words shall not pass away."*
>
> Matthew 24:35 (KJV)

KEY THEMES

Six Truths About the Bible

These six truths run through the whole story of how the Bible came to us.

1

God Breathed It

Scripture comes from God Himself, so it is true and without error.

"All scripture is given by inspiration of God"

2 TIMOTHY 3:16

2

Holy Men Wrote It

God spoke through real men, in their own words and styles.

"The Spirit of the LORD spake by me, and His word was in my tongue."

2 SAMUEL 23:2

3

Jesus Confirmed It

Jesus treated the whole Old Testament as God's Word and pointed to Himself in it.

"written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning Me."

LUKE 24:44

4

God's People Received It

Believers recognized God's voice and received the books as His Word.

"ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God"

1 THESSALONIANS 2:13

5

God Preserved It

Through centuries of careful copying, God has kept His Word for every generation.

"but the word of our God shall stand for ever."

ISAIAH 40:8

6

It Is Complete

God has spoken fully in His Son; nothing is to be added to His Word.

"the faith which was once delivered unto the saints."

JUDE 3