



## The Formation of the English Bible

By Stephen Cavness

“The B-I-B-L-E, yes that’s the book for me,  
I stand alone on the word of God, the B-I-B-L-E!”

As Evangelical Christians and inheritors of the Protestant Reformation, which reclaimed the truth of *Sola Scriptura*,<sup>1</sup> the Bible is our sole source of authority. No Popes, creeds, councils, or other decrees of man supersede the authority of what God has revealed to us through His Word. For Evangelicals, the authority of Scripture is not only important, it is essential. Many denominations and ecclesiastical<sup>2</sup> organizations have seen fit to summarize their stance on the authority of Scripture to leave no room for misunderstanding.

The Westminster Confession of Faith states:

The authority of the holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man or Church, but wholly upon God (who is truth itself), the Author thereof; and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God.<sup>3</sup>

The 2000 Baptist Faith and Message writes:

The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is God’s revelation of Himself to man. It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. Therefore, all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy. It reveals the principles by which God judges us, and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried. All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation.<sup>4</sup>

The Cambridge Declaration of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals instructs:

We reaffirm the inerrant Scripture to be the sole source of written divine revelation, which alone can bind the conscience. The Bible alone teaches all that is necessary for our salvation from sin and is the standard by which all Christian behavior must be measured.

We deny that any creed, council or individual may bind a Christian’s conscience, that the Holy Spirit speaks independently of or contrary to what is set forth in the Bible, or that personal spiritual experience can ever be a vehicle of revelation.<sup>5</sup>

The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, a watershed document in the History of the modern Evangelical Church, affirmed the following:

1. God, Who is Himself Truth and speaks truth only, has inspired Holy Scripture in order thereby to reveal Himself to lost mankind through Jesus Christ as Creator and Lord, Redeemer and Judge. Holy Scripture is God’s witness to Himself.
2. Holy Scripture, being God’s own Word, written by men prepared and superintended by His Spirit, is of infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches: it is to be believed, as God’s instruction, in all that it affirms, obeyed, as God’s command, in all that it requires; embraced, as God’s pledge, in all that it promises.
3. The Holy Spirit, Scripture’s divine Author, both authenticates it to us by His inward witness and opens our minds to understand its meaning.
4. Being wholly and verbally God-given, Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching, no less in what it states about God’s acts in creation, about the events of world history, and about its own literary origins under God, than in its witness to God’s saving grace in individual lives.
5. The authority of Scripture is inescapably impaired if this total divine inerrancy is in any way limited or disregarded, or made relative to a view of truth contrary to the Bible’s own; and such lapses bring serious loss to both the individual and the Church.<sup>6</sup>

These statements and others show the importance of having an accurate record of God’s revelation to man. God has not left His people to wander aimlessly through

life wondering what it is they are to do and how they are to do it. We are not like the prophets of Baal who cut themselves in a desperate attempt to communicate with their God.<sup>7</sup> We know what pleases Him, and we know what displeases Him.

Our God has spoken clearly to us, and revealed Himself, through the Bible. We can know God because His word never changes, just as God Himself never changes.<sup>8</sup> We should not be governed by emotions or opinions that are always coming and going and developing, and we are not left to the mere dictates of men who age, die, and make mistakes.

As John Armstrong stated:

The authority of the Scripture, then, is not located in human brilliance or witness. It is not found in the person of Moses, Paul, or Peter. The authority is found in the sovereign God Himself. The God who “breathed out” the words through human writers stands behind every statement, every doctrine, every promise and every command written in the Scripture.<sup>9</sup>

Scripture itself speaks to the importance of God’s Word. For example:

...and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work (2 Tim 3:15-17).

God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world (Heb 1:1-2).

Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth (Jn 17:17).

For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Heb 4:12).

The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul; The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes.

The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; The judgments of the LORD are true; they are righteous altogether (Ps 19:7-9).

Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so (Acts 17:11).

How can we be obedient to God when we do not know what He expects of us? How can we worship a God we do not know? How can we be saved without the Gospel being explained? All of these answers are found in the Bible. Indeed, most of us would agree that Scripture is essential to the Christian life.

But how can we be sure that the book that we carry to church and read during our devotional times is what God intended us to have? How did God’s Word go from old parchments written in foreign languages to nice and neatly bound books in English? Why are there so many different versions of the Bible?

What follows is a general and brief outline of the formation of your English Bible.

### I. “The Book”

The 66 books of the Old and New Testaments are what we refer to as “the Bible.” These books are:

#### Old Testament

Genesis	Ezra	Hosea
Exodus	Nehemiah	Joel
Leviticus	Esther	Amos
Numbers	Job	Obadiah
Deuteronomy	Psalms	Jonah
Joshua	Proverbs	Micah
Judges	Ecclesiastes	Nahum
Ruth	Song of Solomon	Habakkuk
1 Samuel	Isaiah	Zephaniah
2 Samuel	Jeremiah	Haggai
1 Kings	Lamentations	Zechariah
2 Kings	Ezekiel	Malachi
1 Chronicles	Daniel	
2 Chronicles		

## New Testament

Matthew	Ephesians	Hebrews
Mark	Philippians	James
Luke	Colossians	1 Peter
John	1 Thessalonians	2 Peter
Acts	2 Thessalonians	1 John
Romans	1 Timothy	2 John
1 Corinthians	2 Timothy	3 John
2 Corinthians	Titus	Jude
Galatians	Philemon	Revelation

The Bible is divided into two sections known as the Old Testament and New Testament. “Testament” is just another word for “covenant.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, the Old Testament is the account and record of God and His people during the time of the old covenant,<sup>11</sup> and the New Testament is the account of the establishment of the new covenant and its continuance.<sup>12</sup>

## II. The Old Testament

The Old Testament<sup>13</sup> was originally written in Hebrew, with some sections in Aramaic.<sup>14</sup> The *torah*, or books of the law, were written by Moses around 1400 B.C., and are made up of the first five books of the Old Testament: Genesis through Deuteronomy. The books of the prophets, or *neviim* were finished around 430 B.C. with Malachi. The “writings” – the poetry and wisdom literature known as the *kethuvim* – round out the Old Testament.

In the New Testament, the Old Testament is often referred to by Jesus and the apostles as “the law and the prophets,”<sup>15</sup> “the writings,” or “as Moses said.”<sup>16</sup>

The Old Testament has been recognized as complete and authoritative from as early as 170 A.D. John Piper, in his Bethlehem Institute seminar, “Why We Believe in the Bible,” quotes Melito, Bishop of Sardis:

When I came to the east and reached the place where these things were preached and done, and learnt accurately the books of the Old Testament, I set down the facts and sent them to you. These are their names: five books of Moses, Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Joshua the son of Nun, Judges, Ruth, four books of Kingdoms, two books of Chronicles, the Psalms of David, the Proverbs of Solomon and his Wisdom, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs, Job, the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, the Twelve in a single book, Daniel, Ezekiel, Ezra (cited in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 4.26.14).<sup>17</sup>

The order of Old Testament books that we currently follow is the order of the early Greek translation called the Septuagint,<sup>18</sup> which was translated around 250 B.C.

So what were the criteria for counting certain writings as Scripture? In summary, here are the essentials:

- Anything revealed by God and recorded by Moses
- Books written by true Prophets (as defined by Deuteronomy 18)
- Writings that were consistent with the character of God
- Books received and used by the congregation of the people of Israel

These sacred writings were carefully copied and preserved by Jewish scribes. In 1947, fragments of every Old Testament book but Esther were found in caves in Qumran dating as far back as the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.

## III. The New Testament

Originally written in Greek, with some phrases in Aramaic,<sup>19</sup> the books of the New Testament are listed above.

Why these books and not others? F.F. Bruce puts it best when he writes:

What is particularly important to notice is that the New Testament canon was not demarcated by the arbitrary decree of any Church Council. When at last a Church Council – the Synod of Hippo in AD 393 – listed the 27 books of the New Testament, it did not confer upon them any authority which they did not already possess, but simply recorded their previously established canonicity.<sup>20</sup>

This is an important point to make and bears repeating. The Church did not arbitrarily decide what was Scripture and what was not. Rather, early Christians took the collections of writings they already had and simply recognized the existing truth: that these writings possessed authority. Authority was derived from:

- Authorship from an Apostle or a close associate of an apostle (Luke with Paul and Mark with Peter)
- Continuous use by the Church
- Unity/Agreement with the rest of Scripture

While there are no original copies of these documents, there are 5,300 known copies and fragments in the original Greek, nearly 800 of which were copied before 1000 A.D. Homer's *Iliad*, one of the most famous literary works of Western civilization, has 643 copies of manuscript support. Within those copies, there are 764 lines of text that are disputed as to their accuracy, whereas there are only 40 lines in all of the New Testament that are disputed, none of which would compromise a major doctrine of Scripture.<sup>21</sup>

In fact, many people are unaware that each of William Shakespeare's 37 plays (written in the 1600's) have gaps in the surviving manuscripts, forcing scholars to "fill in the blanks." This pales in textual comparison with the over 5,300 copies and fragments of the New Testament that, together, assure us that nothing is lost. In fact, all of the New Testament except eleven verses can be reconstructed from the writings of the early church fathers in the second and third centuries.<sup>22</sup>

With these things in mind, we can be sure that the Scriptures have been kept from dilution or error.

It is important to note that these 66 books are the only ones recognized by the early church as authoritative. Some other religions or denominations may include "apocryphal"<sup>23</sup> books in their canon or authoritative books or manuals such as the *Book of Mormon*, *Doctrine and Covenants*, and *Pearl of Great Price*. These books are not Scripture and are not binding as the Word of God.<sup>24</sup>

#### IV. FROM HEBREW AND GREEK TO ENGLISH

We have briefly covered the origins of Scripture, but how did our Bible move from its original languages to English? The following is a historical outline of the formation of the English Bible:

- **300 – 500 A.D.** – The Bible of the common people takes shape in the form of wood carvings, stained glass windows, etc.
- **315 A.D.** – Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, identifies the 27 books of the New Testament.
- **405 A.D.** – Jerome translates the Latin Bible (Vulgate).
- **1382 A.D.** – First English translation of the Bible by John Wycliffe.

- **1414 A.D.** – Capital punishment is declared for reading Scripture in one's native tongue. In 1428, as a result of his translating the Bible into English, Wycliffe's bones are dug up and burned by the Roman Catholic Church.
- **1454 A.D.** – Invention of the printing press.
- **1526 A.D.** – William Tyndale publishes the first printed New Testament.
- **1530's A.D.** – Martin Luther works on the German Bible
- **1535 A.D.** – William Coverdale prints the first complete English Bible with both Old and New Testaments. He is then burned at the stake in 1536 by the Roman Catholic Church.
- **1560 A.D.** – Geneva Bible is printed. This is the first Bible taken to the North American continent and is used by the Pilgrims, the Puritans, and Shakespeare.
- **1611 A.D.** – King James breaks away from the Roman Catholic Church, starts the Anglican church, and prints an English Bible.
- **1881 A.D.** – English Revised Edition of the Bible is printed.
- **1901 A.D.** – The American Standard Bible is printed.
- **1952 A.D.** – Revised Standard Version of the Bible is printed.
- **1963 A.D.** – New American Standard Bible is printed.
- **1978 A.D.** – New International Version of the Bible is printed.
- **1982 A.D.** – New King James Version of the Bible is printed.
- **1989 A.D.** – New Revised Standard Version of the Bible is printed.
- **2001 A.D.** – English Standard Version of the Bible is printed.
- **2004 A.D.** – Holman Christian Standard Version of the Bible is printed.

As Christians, the fact that we have our own Bibles – and multiple copies of them – should give us pause. Men and

women were killed for *copying* the Bible into their own languages. Even today, people in some countries are still killed for *owning* copies of the Bible in their own language. We are greatly blessed to be able to have copies of God’s revelation readily available.

Shame on us if we take it for granted, do not read it, or neglect to live by it.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> “Sola Scriptura” is Latin for “Scripture alone.”

<sup>2</sup> Terry L. Miethe, *The Compact Dictionary of Doctrinal Words* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House Publishers, 1988) 79. The term “ecclesiology” comes from the Greek work *ekklesia*, which means “church.” Consequently, ecclesiology is the study of the church.

<sup>3</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith (1646). Chapter 1, Article IV.

<sup>4</sup> Baptist Faith and Message (2000). Article I.

<sup>5</sup> The Cambridge Declaration (1996). Thesis 1.

<sup>6</sup> Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978). Summary Statement.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Kings 18: 16-40.

<sup>8</sup> Js 1:17.

<sup>9</sup> John H. Armstrong in *Sola Scriptura: The Protestant Position on the Bible*, ed. by Don Kistler (Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> Miethe, 203.

<sup>11</sup> This old covenant refers to the time period from Adam and Eve in Genesis 1 until the close of the Old Testament canon in the book of Malachi.

<sup>12</sup> This new covenant refers to the time period from the beginning of John the Baptist’s ministry (Matt 3) until the present day.

<sup>13</sup> The authors of the Old Testament – the Israelites – referred to the Old Testament as the *torah*, the *neviim*, and the *kethuvim*. In English, this means “the law, the prophets, and the writings,” referring to the three major divisions of the Old Testament:

1. The Law – consisting of the books from Genesis – Deuteronomy.
2. The Prophets – consisting of Joshua; Judges; 1, 2, Samuel; 1,2 Kings; Isaiah; Jeremiah; Ezekiel; Hosea; Joel; Amos; Obadiah; Jonah; Micah; Nahum; Habakkuk; Zephaniah; Haggai; Zechariah; Malachi.
3. The Writings – consisting of Psalms; Proverbs; Job; Song of Solomon; Ruth; Lamentations; Ecclesiastes; Esther; Daniel; Ezra; Nehemiah; and 1, 2 Chronicles.

<sup>14</sup> Parts of the book of Daniel are written in Aramaic.

<sup>15</sup> Lk 16:28-31; 24:25.

<sup>16</sup> “As Moses said” refers to the law, since Moses wrote the law. For an example of the New Testament usage of some of these terms, see Luke 16:28-31; 24:25, 44.

<sup>17</sup> John Piper, “Why We Believe the Bible: The Inspiration, Inerrancy, and Authority of the Bible.” Downloaded from [www.DesiringGod.org](http://www.DesiringGod.org) on 2/10/07.

<sup>18</sup> The Septuagint is also referred to as LXX.

<sup>19</sup> One instance of an Aramaic phrase is Jesus’ statement in Matthew 27:46, “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachtani?”

<sup>20</sup> *The Books and the Parchments* ((Old Tappan, N. J.: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1984) 112-113.

<sup>21</sup> The facts related to these copies are borrowed from Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix’s *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986) 367.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York: T & T Clark, 2001) 51. The Greek word, *apocrypha*, means “hidden.” It refers to those books which were hidden because of 1) their heresy or 2) their hidden teachings. Bruce Metzger, *An Introduction to The Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957) 5.

<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of these works, see our 2006 article, “The Bible Compared to the Koran and the Book of Mormon.”