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HOW DID WE GET THE BIBLE?

BY ROBERT VELARDE 📅 JANUARY 1, 2009



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Some people think the Bible was all written down about the same time, copied and distributed. But the Bible is not "instant" Scripture and it wasn't all written down around the same time.

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The Bible is the foundation of Christianity. In it we learn about the human condition, our need for salvation, God's plan through Christ, the everlasting joy that awaits those who trust in Jesus, and more. So far in this series we've looked at the question of truth in relation to the Bible, as well as its reliability. Now we'll turn to the important question, "How did we get the Bible?" In doing so we'll look at four key areas regarding the Bible: inspiration, canonization, transmission and translation. Before we do so, let's look at some misconceptions about how we got the Bible.

Misconceptions About the Bible

Some people think the Bible was all written down about the same time, copied and distributed. But the Bible is not "instant" Scripture and it wasn't all written down around the same time. Instead, the books of the Bible were written over a lengthy period of time by different people inspired by God. Another misconception about the Bible is that it was merely created by a select few in order to consolidate, gain or maintain power and prestige. Given the adversity faced by the Hebrew people and, later, the persecution suffered by Christians, this explanation is far from plausible. For instance, rather than gaining power or prestige, the early Christians were severely oppressed, while many others were killed – martyred for believing the message of the gospel. Yet another misconception says there are many different "Bibles" so how can one be sure the Christian version is the right one? This misconception can take different forms. One form sets forth many different "gospels" as proof that the New Testament record of Jesus is not necessarily the true version. What about the Gospel of Thomas? Keep in mind that there are dozens of writings claiming to be Christian gospels along the lines of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. But very few copies of these rival "gospels" exist. The Gospel of Thomas, of which there are references to more than one version, has distinctly Gnostic influences. In short, the Gnostics believed that the flesh is bad, but the spirit is good. As a result, they denied that Jesus truly came in the flesh, a position the early church countered by writings such as 1 John. Thomas also presents Jesus doing some things very much out of character. In one passage, for example, Jesus causes a boy to wither (die). It's also important to keep in mind that these additional "gospels" appear in the historical record long after the New Testament manuscripts, making these "lost" gospels highly suspect not only in reference to their content, but their reliability.

Transmission and Translation

Stories and claims about other "gospels" raise important questions about the transmission and translation of the Bible or any historical record. Since we've covered these topics somewhat in other articles in this series, See, "How Do We Know the Bible is True?" and "Is the Bible Reliable?" we'll only cover the topic briefly here so we can get to the inspiration and canonization of the Bible. "Transmission" in relation to the Bible has to do with how the contents of the Bible were transmitted through history. If the record of transmission is poor, then the record we have is highly suspect. But if the record of transmission is rich, having a variety of manuscript copies for instance, then we have cause for trusting the reliability of the record. In the case of the New Testament, For more on the reliability of the Old Testament see Walter C. Kaiser, *The Old Testament Documents: Are They Reliable and Relevant?* (InterVarsity Press, 2001). the transmission of the documents through history is astounding. Not only do we have thousands of manuscript copies, as well as thousands more fragments or portions of the New Testament, but in comparing the New Testament copies we have today in various languages with those available centuries ago we can see the message remains intact. Errors or changes are slight, known as variants, and do not change any central belief of Christianity. When it comes to transmission and translation, then, we can indeed trust the documents.

God-breathed

But isn't it possible to have an accurately transmitted record that is still just a human invention? That's where inspiration comes in. The word "inspire" comes from the Latin, meaning to breathe on or into. Hence, Paul writes

in 2 Timothy 3:16, “All Scripture is God-breathed.” The phrase “God-breathed” is translated from the Greek word, *theopneustos*, meaning God-breathed and, by extension, inspired by God. As Geisler and Nix write, “... inspiration is the process by which Spirit-moved writers recorded God-breathed writings.” Norman Geisler and William Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (Moody Press, 1986), p. 36. This book provides an excellent overview of how we got the Bible, covering many topics in great detail. Inspiration means that human writers were inspired by God and moved by the Holy Spirit to record accurately what God wanted them to preserve. It does not mean God took control of people in the sense of some occult practices known as automatic writing, where the writer is in a trance-like state. It also doesn’t mean the writers of the Bible were simply taking dictation. But it does mean that their words were divinely inspired and recorded. The Bible was written by real people, living in real places, recording real historical events, and also communicating God’s real truths.

The New Testament Canon

Now the question remains about how the Christian church ultimately put the parts of the Bible together. This really relates to the New Testament, as the Old Testament was already accepted and codified in the books accepted by the Jewish people as divinely inspired. But following the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ around 33 A.D., the fledgling Christian church found itself struggling for survival and, in the process, writing inspired documents that would later become the New Testament. The process of *canonization* has to do with what writings are deemed inspired and thus included in the New Testament *canon*. The word *canon* originated in reference to a measuring reed or standard by which something is measured. In reference to the Bible a canon has to do with genuinely inspired writings. The Church was very methodical in reference to the New Testament canon. Several criteria were necessary in order for a writing to be accepted. It’s also important to note that God guided the process in accordance with His plans. As such, the process of canonization was not left solely in the hands of fallible human beings. But we will mention three here. First, the document in question had to conform to the rule of faith, “conformity between the document and orthodoxy, that is, Christian truth recognized as normative in the churches.” D.A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Zondervan, 1992), p. 494. Second, the document required some sort of apostolicity, “which as a criterion came to include those who were in immediate contact with the apostles.” Ibid. Third, “a document’s widespread and continuous acceptance and usage by churches everywhere” Ibid., p. 495 was taken into consideration. From God to us, the Bible is true, reliable, and inspired.

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Robert Velarde is author of “Conversations with C.S. Lewis” (InterVarsity Press), “The Heart of Narnia” (NavPress), and “Inside The Screwtape Letters” (Baker Books). He studied philosophy of religion and apologetics at Denver Seminary and is pursuing graduate studies in philosophy at Southern Evangelical Seminary.

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