

The BibleKEY Correspondence Course

LESSON 2 - THE BIBLE: HOW IT CAME TO US - Part 1

AS indicated in the previous lesson, the Bible is THE most unique book in existence. From whatever point of view we consider it, whether it be in regards to its message, and the consistency and dependability of it throughout, or whether it be simply in regards to its literary and historical value, the antiquity of its writings and the vast span of time which it covers, it is truly a wonderful and remarkable book.

When embarking upon serious Bible study, it is important to understand the background, history and sources of the English Bible. **The original Divinely inspired Bible manuscripts were not written in the English language, but in Hebrew and Greek.** The further a version is removed from the original, both in time and in language, the greater the potential for the human element to enter in, because the work of transmitting the Bible down to our times and into our language depended upon the efforts of men who were not inspired. Inasmuch as the human element is a significant factor in this great work, we must realize that the English versions of the Bible are, unfortunately, not the purest form of the Word of God, although certain versions do have a remarkably high degree of accuracy.

PURPOSE OF LESSONS 2 - 4

- 1. To outline the long and tedious process by which the Bible has been handed down to us its present form, so that we may be better equipped to understand it;*
- 2. To provide basic background information regarding its history and its structure;*
- 3. To help recognize the many forms and versions in which it appears, and to know how to identify those versions that have the highest degree of accuracy relative to the original source; and to understand the need to occasionally refer to other versions for comparison;*
- 4. To understand the importance of consulting Hebrew & Greek lexicons, concordances and dictionaries, etc., in order to get past the barriers of the English language to the meanings of the original words and phrases as intended by the Divinely inspired writers.*

WHEN AND HOW DID THE BIBLE BEGIN?

A major portion of the old Testament is occupied by the first five books. Moses is credited with the writing of these, as well as the book of Job. This fixes a starting date for the writing of the Bible, for, although the events recorded by Moses date back as much as 4000 B.C., he lived in the time period dating from about 1570 to 1450 B.C.; and, at some point during those 120 years (most likely towards the end, perhaps about 1500 B.C.), marks the commencement of God's message to us in written form.

BibleKEY definitions:

"papyrus" - *paper-like material obtained from Egyptian water-plant; writing material used by earliest manuscripts. Usually rolled into a scroll. Those in existence today are only in fragments*

"parchment" - *writing material used in the 4th c. A.D. made from skins of sheep; used by later manuscripts, many still in existence. Often appeared in book form. Very durable.*

"vellum" - *a refined form of parchment made from skins of calves*

"version" - *the translation of the Bible, or a part of it, into another language*

"manuscript" - *a handwritten document written on papyrus, parchment, or vellum; used to preserve contents of scriptures up to time of the printing press*

"copy" - *a word for word reproduction of a manuscript or version*

BibleKEY fact:

“About 1500 B.C. marks the commencement of God's message to us in written form”

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The knowledge of writing was a rare possession in those days. All evidence seems to indicate that the development of Hebrew writing did not occur until about 1000 B.C. or about the time of Samuel and King David. Other forms of writing prevailed however, and evidence of early forms of Babylonian, Chaldean, and Egyptian writing have been discovered. Moses doubtless learned how to write in Egypt.

The first Biblical reference to writing after the time of Moses occurs in Judges 5:14 (margin), where the Song of Deborah speaks of "the staff of the scribe" (1250 B.C.). Samuel, David, Nathan the prophet, Gad the seer, and many others are said to have made records in writing. But it was not until about the time of the exile (Nehemiah - Ezra period or about 500 B.C.) that the concerted effort was put forth, not only to record events, but also to compile history, arrange prophetic writings, and to select songs and Psalms for their own use as well as succeeding generations. The result of this effort was a collection of writings which soon became valued and treasured as God's message. It was this collection that Christ and the apostles referred to as "the scriptures", or, "Moses and the prophets" - although they most likely used the Greek Version (Septuagint).

PRESERVING THE BIBLE

Many dangers threatened the existence of those first manuscripts. Any document written upon papyrus or skin was always in danger of being lost or destroyed or succumbing to the ravages of time. We well know what effect a mere 10 or 20 years of use has upon books such as our Bibles; we can easily surmise what happens after the passage of 100 years - the book simply becomes old and brittle, and as soon as a hand is laid upon it, it falls apart. Therefore, in order to preserve the manuscript and increase its usefulness, it was copied laboriously by hand many, many times.

The original manuscripts have long ago disappeared. None are known to be in existence today, although there is always hope that someday some fragments of them may be found. When the tribes of Israel were carried off into captivity by Nebuchadnezzar (king of Babylon) and Antiochus Epiphanes (king of Egypt) in the 6th century B.C., they brought with them their copies of the scriptures into Babylonia and into Egypt. These copies particularly those that found their way into Egypt - became the sources for future manuscripts and versions.

MAINTAINING BIBLICAL ACCURACY & INTEGRITY

In addition to the dangers of destruction, there were also the dangers of error creeping into the text, on account of all-the copying and reprinting taking place. Most of these errors were unintentional and occurred simply by accident. To illustrate, let any one of us try to make exact copies of just a very few pages of printed material, and see how many simple but aggravating

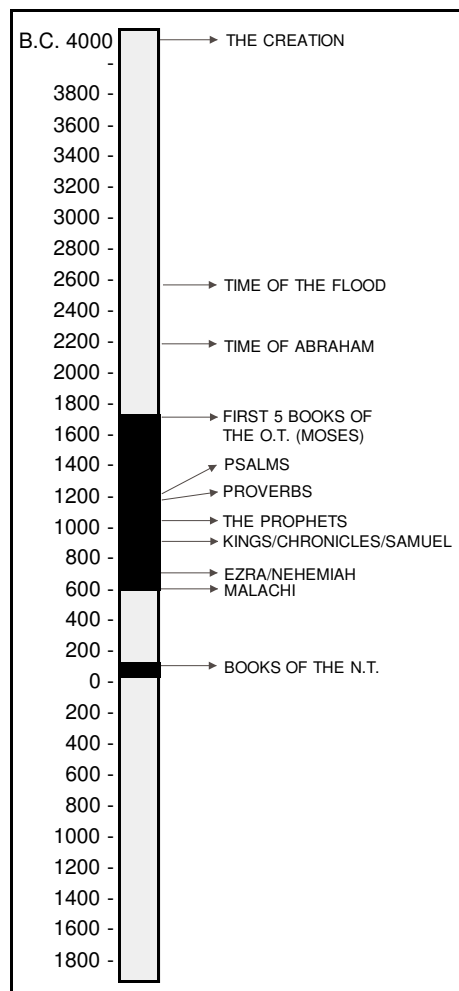


Fig. 1 When books of the Bible were written

BibleKEY fact:

“None of the original manuscripts are in existence today, though there is hope that some day some fragments may be found”

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mistakes we will make. Most textual errors that have occurred have been of this type - that is, accidental and unintentional. A few, however, have occurred as a result of the copyists' desire to make a correction to a statement, or to use more colorful wording, or to bring a statement into harmony with the theological ideas either of the copyist or of the age in which he lives.

Thus by such means a few textual variations have occurred over the hundreds of years that copies have been made. But this problem is not near as great as one might think it could be, because conscientious minds soon became aware of what was happening, and, as a result, whenever a copy was made, or a version printed, there was a concerted effort to preserve and use for the source the oldest and most original manuscripts in existence.

Many of these manuscripts are in existence today, some having been preserved for over 2000 years. While they are not the autographed originals of the Biblical authors themselves, they have brought to us the Bible in the most highly accurate and readable form.

THE PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATION

The Hebrew language is a particularly difficult language to translate. It has no vowels. These have to be supplied by the reader or the translator, as the case may be. The Hebrew alphabet consists of 22 consonants. For instance, we could have a Hebrew word consisting of the consonants b d. It could be bud, bad, bed, or bid. The vowel would have to be supplied by the reader so as to make up the word which the context required. Also (and this applied to most of the Greek New Testament as well as Hebrew Old Testament manuscripts), there were no spaces to separate one word from another; no punctuation, no verses or chapters. Let us take an example direct from the Hebrew and translate it into English. The first task is the easiest and it has already been done - simply supplying English lettering for the Hebrew. Thus it appears:

*"Yhvthhstsrch&nndknwm"; or, (with vowels & word spacing)
"Yahveh thou hast searched me and known me".*

The Jews were well aware of this problem, especially in the period following the captivity, as the people became less practiced in the Hebrew language because of the increasing prominence and influence of the Greek language. Of particular concern was it to a group of Jews called the MASSORITES ("keepers" or "guardians" of the tradition) whose sacred duty it was to preserve the text and guard against the least alteration - not only in lettering but in pronunciation. To preserve pronunciation without vowels is next to impossible, so they invented a series of vowel signs to be interspaced between the consonants at the appropriate places, also adding signs for punctuation. Their work began about 500 A.D. and continued with painstaking study and unspeakable devotion

BibleKEY definitions:

"translate" - *to render a word in one language by its exact or closest equivalent in another language*

"transfer" - *to convey an original word untranslated into a version*

BibleKEY fact:

“ *The Hebrew language is a particularly difficult language to translate. It has no vowels. These have to be supplied by the reader or the translator, as the case may be.* ”

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for many generations. The sign system was finally fully developed by 900 A.D. - a period of four hundred years! Surely this is something that must impress us as much as anything in this study - the incredible amounts of time occupied in the preservation, copying, and translation of the BIBLE!

The chart in Figure 2 displays the various manuscripts and versions that were used by the translators as the translation sources for the Bibles in our possession today. In the following sections we will go down the line and comment briefly upon each one of them.

OLD TESTAMENT

THE HEBREW MANUSCRIPTS - These are the original manuscripts containing the Old Testament scriptures as written by Divinely inspired writers. None are in existence today.

THE SAMARITAN VERSION - While commonly termed a "version", that is, a translation from one language to another, it is actually more in the nature of a "revision" (see definition on pg. 5) of the original Hebrew text. It was written by the Samaritans, a people who were brought into the land of Palestine in the 7th century B.C. by the King of Assyria to fill the population vacuum which occurred when the Kingdom of Israel fell and its people were exiled. (II Kings 17:24)

The Samaritan people consisted of a blend of several nationalities taken from the areas surrounding Assyria. They had an intensive hatred for the Jews (which was mutual on both sides), and yet claimed the right to worship the God of the Jews. The Jewish Bible contained some writings which they did not accept, therefore they copied from the Jewish Bible only that part which they did accept - the five books of Moses. Owing to the similarity of the Samaritan language and writing with that of the Hebrew, the copy was almost identical to that of the original.

The *Samaritan Version* was written about 400 B.C., only 100 years after the Hebrew Bible was in circulation. The Samaritans' hatred of the Jews caused them to zealously guard their scriptures against Jewish interference; and the Jews did likewise with the Hebrew manuscripts - all of which contributed very highly to accuracy. As in the case of all manuscripts, new copies had to be made from the old in order to guard against extinction either through aging and decay, or from complete destruction at enemy hands. The oldest manuscript of the Samaritan version in existence today is dated about 1000 A.D. It became lost to the western world for a time but was discovered in 1600 A.D.

THE SEPTUAGINT VERSION - At the time of the Jewish exile,

THE SOURCES OF OUR ENGLISH BIBLE

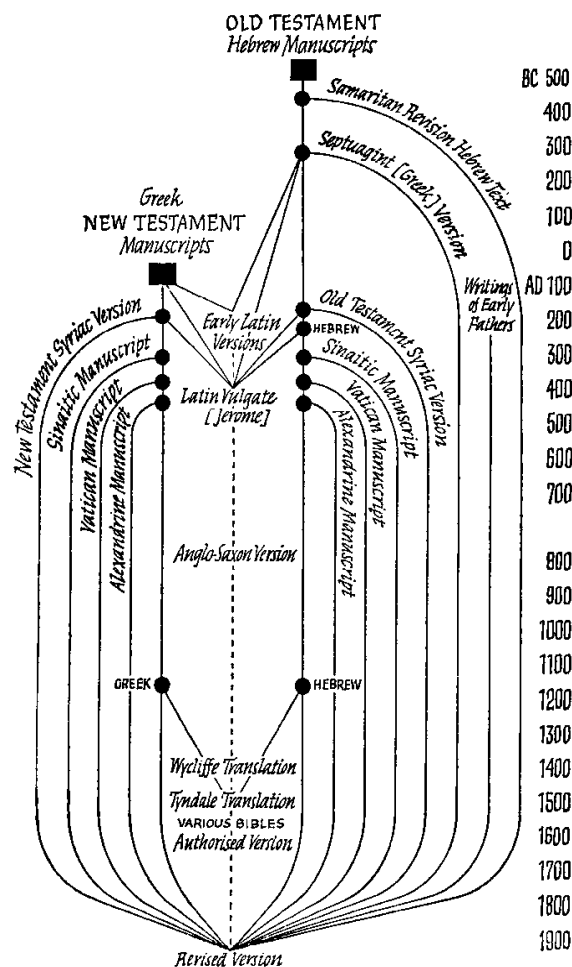


Fig. 2 Sources of our English Bible

BibleKEY fact:

“ The Samaritan Version was written about 400 B.C. and contained the five books of Moses ”

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when the land was plundered by the Assyrians and the Medes and Persians, many Jews fled into Egypt, and no doubt carried with them copies of their Hebrew scriptures. The passing of several hundred years witnessed the conquests by the Greeks led by Alexander the Great, the result of which was the introduction and rapid growth of the Greek language in all conquered lands including Egypt, until it became the universal language of the time. About the year 250 B.C. Egypt had a Greek king who desired to have a copy of the Hebrew Scriptures in the Greek language. His request appealed to the Jewish colony in Alexandria (Egypt) for they too could see the benefits of a Greek version, as the Greek language was having a smothering effect upon the Hebrew. A committee was made up of 70 learned Jews expert in both languages. They began the arduous task but others had to complete it. The entire process took about 200 years, being completed about 50 B.C. The result of their work came to be known as the Septuagint Version. It quickly became a standard fixture in "Hellenized" synagogues - if not in Palestine itself - and some scholars have suggested that it was this Greek version of the Hebrew Old Testament that Jesus and the early Christians used. "Septuagint" means "seventy", and it was so called in honor of the seventy Jews who began the work. The name is often expressed in Roman numerals - "LXX"

THE NEW TESTAMENT

THE GREEK NEW TESTAMENT MANUSCRIPTS - These were the original Divinely inspired writings of the apostles which circulated among the early Christian believers in the first and second century A.D. They, like the Hebrew manuscripts, are not in existence today except in the form of copies which have been made of them. They were also quickly and widely translated into other tongues - Egyptian, Ethiopian, Armenian, Latin, and Syrian - in other words, into those languages and dialects of the outlying regions where Greek was little known.

EGYPTIAN VERSIONS - became necessary as the gospel spread up the Nile from Alexandria. The first of these was the SAHIDIC version, made about 200 A.D. The second was the COPTIC version made about 250 A.D. and is still in use today by Coptic Christians, of the upper Nile.

BibleKEY fact:

“ It was this Greek (Septuagint) version of the Hebrew Old Testament that was in use during the time of Jesus and the early Christians ”

BibleKEY definitions:

"revision" - the reproduction of a version using the earliest manuscripts available to update the translation of the text in accordance with an established revision guideline

NEXT LESSON: THE BIBLE: HOW IT CAME TO US - PART 2

In Lesson 3 we will continue to trace the progress of Bible transmission, beginning with the first manuscripts containing BOTH Old & New Testaments through to the modern English versions in our possession today.

THE BIBLE: HOW IT CAME TO US - Part 1

Name Mr/Mrs/Miss

Address Postal Code

* You may need an additional sheet for your answers if there is not enough space below. Your answers to the following questions will help you - and us - to determine how much you have discovered about your Bible. Please return this form in the envelope provided even if you are unable to answer all the questions. On receipt of it we will forward the next lesson in the series, as well as

1. In what languages were the original Bible manuscripts written?

2. What 4 things do we hope to accomplish with Lessons 2 - 4?
 - a)
 - b)
 - c)
 - d)

3. What does "manuscript" mean?

4. What date appears to mark the beginning of the Word of God in written form?

5. What were the physical dangers threatening the existence of God's Word?

6. What 2 dangers threatened the accuracy of God's Word?

7. Are any of the original inspired manuscripts in existence today?

8. What problems confronted the translators of the Hebrew scriptures?

9. a) What part of the Bible does the Samaritan Version include?
b) When was the Samaritan Version written?

10. What prompted the writing of the Septuagint Version?

11. Why is the Septuagint Version significant to us today?

12. What is meant by "revision"?