

## 1

# One Story, Many Books

## Objectives:

*Your study of this chapter should help you to:*

- Summarize the process of the formation of the biblical books and the canonization of the Old and the New Testament
- Describe the various major literary sections of the Bible and the books that are part of each of these sections
- Discuss the unity and continuity of the biblical story in the Old and the New Testament
- Summarize the history of the Bible's translation

## Questions to consider as you read:

1. What is the relationship of revelation and inspiration to the making of the Bible?
2. How do the biblical books demonstrate the unity and continuity of the biblical story?
3. How do you relate the concept of the covenant community to the formation of the Bible?

## K

## Key Words to Understand

Revelation  
 Incarnation  
 Inspiration  
 Dictation theory of inspiration  
 Dynamical theory of inspiration  
 Canon  
 Theology  
 Salvation history  
 Torah  
 Nebi'im  
 The Dead Sea Scrolls  
 Kethubim  
 Canonization  
 Gospels  
 Letters  
 Apocalyptic literature  
 Targums  
 Septuagint  
 Vulgate  
 Apocrypha

## What Is the Bible All About?

### *God's Revelation in History*

The story of the Bible is often called “the greatest story ever told.” This is an appropriate way to characterize the Bible because it is the story of a relationship in which God reveals and expresses His love toward humanity. This story reveals to the reader who God is. It is the story of divine **revelation**, the account of God’s self-disclosure to humanity through His words and actions. Thus, this story is more than a mere “story,” rather it is history, because historical events serve as the setting of divine revelation recorded in the Bible.

God reveals himself to us through His creation;  
a sunset over the Sea of Galilee.

Historical events, beginning with God’s creation of the universe and humanity, the rise of human civilization, and the emergence of world political powers, are all part of the story of the Bible. The biblical story that begins in the Book of Genesis with the account of God’s creation of the universe and humanity ends in the Book of Revelation with the expectation of the consummation of history and the creation of a new heaven and a new earth. The focal point of the biblical story is the revelation of God in and through the person of Jesus of Nazareth. God took the flesh-and-blood form of a human being in the person of Jesus (**Incarnation**) and thus He revealed himself totally and completely to the world. Historical events in the Old Testa-



ment constitute the setting of this ultimate reality of God's self-disclosure. The New Testament gives us the record of God's actions in history through the establishment of the Christian community and the growth of the Church throughout the Roman world.

Human history continues to serve as the arena of God's actions through Christ and His Holy Spirit. We need to consider this essential relationship between revelation and history as we embark upon a journey with the communities of faith in the Bible.

### **Inspiration**

Divine **inspiration** played an active part in the receiving and recording of revelation by ancient biblical writers. Though we cannot adequately explain the method and process of inspiration, the Scriptures testify that God played an active part in the writing of the Bible (2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:20-21). Some Christians view inspiration as God's dictation of His speech to the writers of the Bible (**dictation theory of inspiration**). Wesleyan evangelical theologians recognize the active involvement of the Holy Spirit in the writing of the Scriptures (**dynamical theory of inspiration**). The Holy Spirit prepared the biblical writers to receive and communicate revelation. These writers received special understanding of God's activities in history, which they interpreted through the eye of their faith traditions, and communicated through the activity of writing. Dynamical theory focuses on the actual involvement of God's Spirit in the life and work of the biblical writers. Since the Holy Spirit is the active Agent in

communicating revelation through the Scriptures, we need to submit ourselves to the authority and guidance of the Spirit for our correct understanding of the Word of God.

### **The Bible as Canon**

Revelation and inspiration give the Bible the distinctive place in the Christian Church as its **canon**. In a popular sense, the term *canon* refers to a collection of writings accepted by a religious body as authoritative and normative for faith and practice. The Bible as canon reflects the authority of the Scriptures in the Christian tradition. The Bible has authority because it is the record of God's self-disclosure. The Bible sets the standard (literally, the word *canon* in Greek means a rod, standard, or something straight) for faith and practice.

### **Biblical History**

Various biblical stories relate to us what God has done in the past, what God is doing in the present, and what God will do in the future. Biblical writers have not only collected and arranged historical materials but also interpreted events to show the meaning and purpose of God's activities in human history. Biblical history is thus theological history, something quite distinct from secular history in content and orientation (**theology** properly is a "science" or the study of God and His attributes). It is distinct from secular history because it focuses on the activities of God and assumes a direct relationship between God and various historical events.

Biblical writers view the salvation of humanity as the ultimate purpose of God's actions in histo-

ry. New Testament writers claim that God fulfilled the salvation plan through Christ who came into our world “according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23, NRSV). The apostle Paul speaks of the coming of Jesus Christ as God’s “plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Ephesians 1:10, NRSV). This “fullness of time” (*kairos* in Greek) is the time or the season set by God to fulfill His plans and purposes, the focal point of which is the coming of Jesus into the world to bring salvation to sinful humanity. Scholars often describe biblical history as **salvation history** (*heilsgeschichte* in German) because of its emphasis on humanity’s redemption from sin.

Biblical history has continuity and unity. This is evident in the stories of both the Old and the New Testaments. The following major events constitute the framework of the Old Testament story:

*Creation and humanity’s sin*  
(Genesis 1—11)

*God’s covenant with Abraham and his descendants*  
(Genesis 12—50)

*Israel’s exodus from Egypt and the Sinai covenant*  
(Exodus 1—40)

*Israel’s wilderness journey and the conquest of Canaan*  
(Books of Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua)

*Israel under the leadership of charismatic leaders* (Book of Judges and 1 Samuel 1—9)

*The beginning of monarchy*  
(1 Samuel 10—1 Kings 11)

*The divided kingdoms of Israel*  
(1 Kings 12—2 Kings 25)

*The exile and restoration*  
(Books of Ezra and Nehemiah)

During the divided kingdom period the people of Israel came under the political control of Assyria, which brought an end to the Northern Kingdom. When the Assyrian domination came to an end, Babylon gained control of the Southern Kingdom, which resulted in the exile of its population to Babylon. During the Persian period, the exiles returned to their homeland. The later story of Israel (the Jews), though not recorded in the Old Testament, is well known. After the Persians, the Greek rulers controlled Palestine for nearly 170 years. Following the Greek rule, the Jews established an independent Jewish kingdom that lasted for about 100 years. The Jewish independence came to an end when Rome gained political control of Palestine. The story of the New Testament is set in this larger historical context of the story of Israel. The New Testament history shows how the hopes and expectations of Israel concerning the coming of the Davidic Messiah were fulfilled in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. An essential part of this history is the coming of the Gentiles into the Church, an evident display of God’s faithfulness to His promise to bring a blessing to all the families of the earth through the family of Abraham.

Historical narratives in the New Testament primarily focus on the following two categories:

*Birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus*  
(Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John)

*The beginning and the expansion of the Church in the Roman world* (the Book of Acts)

The New Testament history does not end with the Book of Acts, but rather it continues even to the present day and will continue until the Second Advent of Jesus Christ. Biblical history in a real sense is our history, because we not only have inherited this story from the men and women of the Bible but also are participants in the ongoing drama of redemption that continues to be played out on the stage of human history. We cannot remain on the sidelines of biblical history as spectators, but we must enter into this “story” and thus experience a living and dynamic relationship with God.

## The Making of the Bible

### *The Old Testament*

The Old Testament (also known as the Hebrew Scriptures) is the Bible of Judaism and part of the Christian Scriptures. Except for a few passages in the Aramaic language (such as Ezra 4:8–6:18; 7:12–26; Daniel 2:4b–7:28), the books of the Old Testament are written in the Hebrew language. There are 39 books in the Protestant edition of the Old Testament. The Roman Catholic Old Testament has 7 additional books, commonly known as deuterocanonical books or the Apocrypha.

The Jewish tradition divides the Hebrew Scriptures into three sections: Torah (the Law), Nebi'im (the Prophets), and Kethubim (the Writings). The books that belong to the **Torah** or the Law (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) contain the earliest records of human history, and the earliest history of Israel. The stories of Israel include the stories of

the ancestors of that nation, their establishment as a people by God, the rules and regulations established by God for Israel's faith and life in the world, and the story of their journey into the land of Canaan. Except for Genesis 1–11, these books cover the history of Israel from about 1900 B.C. to 1240 B.C.

The section **Nebi'im** (the Prophets) has two subdivisions. The first section, also known as the Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings), deals with the history of the people of Israel, from their entrance into the land of Canaan to the beginning of their captivity in Babylon (1240 B.C. to 587 B.C.). These books are known as the historical books in the Christian tradition. The second section, the Latter Prophets, contains the books of Israel's great prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, and the Twelve (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi).

## A

### Dead Sea Scrolls

The oldest Hebrew manuscripts we have today come from a period around 100 B.C. These manuscripts, found at Qumran, in the northwest area of the Dead Sea, shed some light onto our understanding of the history of the manuscripts of the Old Testament. **The Dead Sea Scrolls**, discovered between 1947 and 1956, include two copies of the Book of Isaiah (one in its complete form), a commentary on the Book of Habakkuk, a number of psalms, and fragments of all the books of the Old Testament, except Esther. In addition, the caves at Qumran also yielded a large number of nonbiblical materials.



The section **Kethubim** (the Writings) contains the following books: Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, 1 Chronicles, and 2 Chronicles.

### ***Formation of the Old Testament***

The Old Testament in its present form is the result of a long and complex process that included the writing and development of manuscripts and the acceptance of selected manuscripts as recognized Scripture by Judaism. The stories in the Book of Genesis were part of Israel's faith traditions during the days of Moses (13th century B.C.). Beginning with the Book of Exodus, the bib-

lical events focus on the life and ministry of Moses. The stories of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy belong to the Mosaic period. Perhaps a substantial part of these stories remained as Israel's oral tradition (orally transmitted stories from one generation to another) for another three or more centuries before they were fixed in a written form. It is also possible that large portions of the Books of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings existed in the form of oral tradition for a considerable period of time. Books of the Prophets belong to a period between the 8th and the 5th century B.C. Most of the Writings also could be dated to this period. It is likely that most of the Old Testa-



Qumran Cave IV, which contained a nearly complete copy of the Greek translation of the 12 minor prophets.

ment books received their final form between 800 and 400 B.C.

The locations where the writing of the books of the Old Testament took place are not clearly known to us. Palestine and Babylon are the likely locations of the writing activity. We do not have the original manuscripts (autographs) of the Old Testament books. Later copies or manuscripts of the Old Testament books are the products of scribes who made careful and accurate copies of existing manuscripts. The wear and tear and the decay of the scrolls would have prompted the making of new copies of older manuscripts.

Qumran discoveries confirmed the scholarly opinion that a variety of manuscript traditions existed during the pre-Christian times. Though not much is known about the history and growth of Old Testament manuscripts, we believe that around 100 B.C. Jewish authorities in Palestine began the process of examining the various manuscript traditions in order to establish the standard and official Scriptures of Judaism. This meant that a large number of manuscripts did not receive recognition as Scripture. This process was completed by A.D. 100.

Since the establishment of a standard and authoritative manuscript tradition, Judaism took special care in copying and preserving the manuscripts of the Old Testament books. By about A.D. 500, the scribes introduced a system of vowels and marginal notes (*masorah*) to the text of the Old Testament. The Masoretic Text (MT), which is the textual source for the Hebrew Bible today, is traced to the completed work of these scribes.

### ***Canonization of the Old Testament***

At various stages in the history of the growth and transmission of the books of the Old Testament, Judaism took steps to recognize these books as authoritative and normative for faith and practice. The precise history of this process (**canonization**) is not known.

Scholars believe that the books of the Law (Torah) were the authoritative scriptures (canon) of Judaism by about 400 B.C. It is possible that these books became authoritative under the influence of Ezra the priest, who influenced the Jewish life in the fifth century B.C. Judaism accepted the Former and Latter Prophets as canon around 200 B.C. Some of the Kethubim (the Writings) were part of the sacred Scriptures of Judaism in the early part of the first century A.D. The references to the Law and the Prophets and the Psalms in the New Testament (see, for example, Luke 24:44) indicate the nature of the Jewish canon in the first century A.D. Official acceptance of the Kethubim as canon took place during the Council of Jamnia around A.D. 95. During this council, the rabbis gave their official endorsement to all the 39 Old Testament books.

### ***The New Testament***

Twenty-seven different pieces of ancient Christian literature form the New Testament. The arrangement of the New Testament shows some striking similarity to that of the Old Testament. Like the Old Testament the New Testament begins with a narrative collection followed by a collection of occasional writings written within that narrated his-

The earliest copies of the New Testament manuscripts were written on papyrus made from the reedlike stalks of papyrus plants.



tory. The New Testament, like the Old, concludes with a prophetic view to the future.

The Books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are called **Gospels** and are named after the person traditionally thought to have written or collected the material in them. Though some events and words of Jesus are common to two or three or even all four of the Gospels, each Gospel writer created a unique portrait of the life and the meaning of Jesus. Each of the Gospels devotes almost a third of the book to the final week, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

The fifth narrative book is the Book of Acts, which is clearly a second volume by the author of the Gospel of Luke. The prologues of both Luke and Acts make it clear that Luke intended these two volumes to be understood as part of the ancient genre of history.

Following the Gospels and Acts the New Testament contains two collections of early Christian **letters**. The first collection contains letters written by the apostle Paul to various churches or individuals

(Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon). The second collection of letters is often called the General or Catholic Letters. The term *Catholic* comes from the fact that many (though not all) of these letters were written to churches rather than to individuals (Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, Jude). All the letters address specific concerns—usually problems or potential problems—which the author was trying to correct by the letter.

The final book of the New Testament is Revelation, an **apocalyptic literature** that contains prophetic visions of the end time. Like the Old Testament, the New Testament concludes with a word of hope for the future.

### ***Formation of the New Testament***

With one or two probable exceptions, all the authors of the New Testament books were Jewish in both nationality and religion. The common language of the Jews who lived in Palestine at Je-



Jesus' time was Aramaic. However, it is almost certain that each of the books of the New Testament were written in the common Greek dialect called koine (Greek for "common") that was used throughout the eastern half of the Roman Empire at that time. Koine Greek was not the language of the classical authors but the language of business and international relations during the time of Jesus.

The books of the New Testament were written between A.D. 50 and 100. As far as we know, only a single copy of each book existed and that copy was at the church to which or for which the book had been written. Second-century documents suggest that these writings were read aloud in the church along with the Old Testament readings. In the course of time other churches would have requested copies of these books, which in turn led to the process of copying the New Testament.

The earliest surviving copies of books of the New Testament are written on papyrus. While it is possible that some books of the New Testament were written on parchment (such as Luke and Acts, which may have been prepared for general publication), it is most likely the majority of the New Testament was first written and then copied on papyrus.

The oldest known copy of a New Testament book is a small piece of papyrus found in Egypt that contains a few verses from John 18. Specialists believe it was written about A.D. 125, within a single generation of the time the fourth Gospel was first written. Several partial papyrus copies of the Gospels, Acts, and Paul's letters that were copied between A.D. 180 and 220 have been found in

the last century. Complete copies of the New Testament written on parchment around A.D. 325 have also been found in the past two centuries. New Testament textual critics now have more than 5,000 whole or partial manuscripts (handwritten copies) of the Greek New Testament, most of them discovered in the past 200 years.

### **Canonization of the New Testament**

It is likely that the first collection of New Testament books by the Early Church was a collection of the Pauline letters. This collection was completed most likely in the first 25 years of the 2nd century. Sometime between A.D. 100 and 150 the four Gospels were collected and bound together for publication. Marcion (mid-2nd century A.D.), who rejected the Old Testament, seems to have

## L

### **Minuscules and Uncials**

Some of the early manuscripts from the 3rd to 6th century are in formal letters, similar to capital letters. These manuscripts are called uncials. Cursive style of writing that connects one letter to another became the dominant method of copying at a later period. Manuscripts in cursive style follow a smaller script known as minuscule. There are thousands of New Testament manuscripts in the minuscule form. However, scholars regard uncials as the earliest and the most reliable sources of the New Testament.

The following are the key uncials, all on leather parchments in codex form:

Codex Sinaiticus, dated to the 4th century, contains all the 27 books.

Codex Vaticanus, also dated to the 4th century, is missing the section after Hebrews 9:13.

Codex Alexandrinus, dated to the 5th century, is missing the Gospel of Matthew.

## H

**History of the Printed New Testament**

Erasmus of Rotterdam is the first scholar to publish a copy of the New Testament in Greek (1516). Later he published four more editions (1519, 1522, 1527, 1535) of this New Testament. Several other editions appeared between 1546 and 1604 (four editions by Robert Stephanus, nine editions by Theodore Beza). All of these editions of the New Testament were based on a 4th-century manuscript, often called Lucianic, also known as Byzantine, Antiochian, Syrian, Ecclesiastical, Koine, or Common text. This text tradition remained as the standard text of the New Testament in Greek until the end of the 19th century. Following the publications of Codex Sinaiticus and Vaticanus in the mid-19th century, B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort published a critical edition of the Greek New Testament in 1881. Their study of thousands of manuscripts and New Testament quotations in the writings of the Church Fathers led them to conclude that Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus contain the most reliable text of the New Testament. The Greek New Testament published by the United Bible societies in 1966 is based on the work of Westcott and Hort. This critical edition gives us an “eclectic” text based on the best witness of New Testament passages found in ancient manuscripts and early Christian writings. The United Bible Society edition has become an important source for modern English translations.

been the first to produce a canonical list of the New Testament books, which consisted of the Gospel of Luke (with the first two chapters edited out) and 10 of the letters of Paul (all but 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus). It is likely that the Christian Church initiated the development of the New Testament canon to respond to the heretical teaching of Marcion. The Muratorian fragment (written between A.D. 180 and 200 and discovered in 1740) contains the oldest list of New Testament books. This document, not available to us in its complete form, lists Luke, John, Acts, the 13 letters of Paul, the letter of Jude, two letters of John, the Wisdom of Solomon, the Revelation of John, and the Revelation of Peter. It is believed that the part that was destroyed contained reference to Matthew and Mark.

From the early part of the 3rd century comes the list of Origen (A.D. 184-254), which includes the

four Gospels, Acts, the 13 letters of Paul, 1 Peter, 1 John, and the Revelation of John as books accepted by all the churches. He also listed Hebrews, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, James, and Jude among the disputed books, and a number of other books that were clearly rejected by the traditional Christian faith. It seems that the Early Church lived with the three categories of Origen (accepted, disputed, rejected books) for over a century. We find for the first time the present canonical list of 27 books in the annual Easter letter of Athanasius (A.D. 367), bishop of Alexandria. In this letter to his churches he listed the 27 books as authoritative or canonical and as Scripture that should be read in the worship of the Church. It appears the Synod of Hippo in North Africa officially recognized the 27 books of the New Testament as canonical Scripture in A.D. 393. The actions of that council were read again and accepted

by the Synod of Carthage in A.D. 397. The notes from this council clearly identify the 27 books of the New Testament as canonical Scripture.

## Translation of the Bible

The first attempt to translate the Bible is traced to the synagogue custom of giving an extemporaneous rendering of the Hebrew Scriptures in the Aramaic language. This custom existed during the days of Ezra and Nehemiah in the middle of the 5th century B.C. (see Nehemiah 8:8) and continued through the first 400 years of the Christian era. The Jewish scribes began to put these oral paraphrases into writing before the time of Christ. These writings are known as **Targums** (which means “translation”).

Translation of a portion of the Old Testament from Hebrew into Greek was the first actual event in the history of Bible translation. This was done in Alexandria, Egypt, for the benefit of the Greek-speaking Jews who lived in Egypt. By about 250 B.C., the translators produced the Torah in the Greek language. Within the next 200 years the entire Old Testament was available in the Greek language. This translation is known as the **Septuagint** (LXX).

The Bible in the Latin language was the second major event in the history of Bible translation. Scholars believe that a version of the Bible in the Latin language existed as early as A.D. 180. In the fourth century A.D., Bishop Jerome began the task of translating the Bible into Latin, using existing Latin versions and the Septuagint. In A.D. 385 he moved to Bethlehem, where he spent the

next 14 years translating the Hebrew Bible into Latin. During the sixth and seventh centuries, the Church Fathers gave priority to Jerome’s work over other existing Latin versions. Though the word *vulgata* (meaning “common”) was previously a term applied to the earlier Latin versions, eventually Jerome’s translation came to be known as the **Vulgate**. Gradually, the Latin Vulgate became the official Bible of Western Europe during the Middle Ages.

## L

### The Apocrypha

The Septuagint translators included in their work other religious writings that did not receive official recognition as inspired and authoritative Scriptures of Judaism. These writings are known to the Protestant tradition as the **Apocrypha**, which means books that are “hidden.” The following 15 books make up the traditional list of the apocryphal books: 1 and 2 Esdras, the Prayer of Manasseh, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, Judith, Tobit, Additions to Esther, Baruch, Epistle of Jeremiah, the Song of the Three Children, Susanna, Bel and the Dragon, and 1 and 2 Maccabees. The Septuagint in the first century A.D. contained all the apocryphal books, except 2 Esdras. Later these books became part of the Bible in the Latin language, and they received canonical status during the Middle Ages in the Roman Catholic Church. During the Protestant Reformation, the Reformers questioned the authority of the apocryphal books. Martin Luther expressed the view that these books lacked inspiration, though they have value as historical or devotional writings. The Roman Catholic tradition continues to view these books as inspired and refers to them as deutero-canon (canon of a lesser authority). Protestant churches in general follow Luther’s view. Bibles produced by ecumenical scholars include the Apocrypha in their work.

John Wycliffe (1330-84) made the first systematic attempt to translate the Bible into the English language. The goal of Wycliffe's work was to fight against the corruption in the Church by making the Bible available to the common people. His complete New Testament appeared in 1380. Two years later, he and his friends completed the whole Bible. After his death in 1384, his friends revised the first edition. The church authorities condemned Wycliffe's writings and ordered his bones to be dug out of his grave and burned.

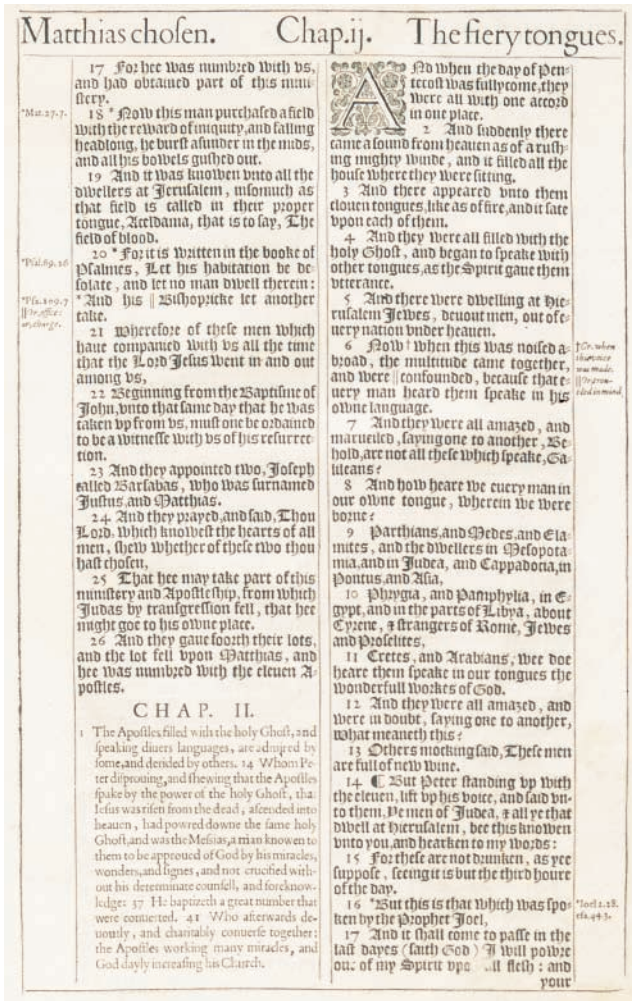
William Tyndale (1494—1536) was the first scholar to translate a portion of the Bible from the original languages. Fearing reprisals from the Church authorities, Tyndale moved to Germany in 1524 and published the first edition of the New Testament in 1526. This was the first printed edition of the English Bible. The Church authorities condemned his work, charged him with heresy, and in 1536 he was condemned to death.

Since the work of Tyndale, the following translations appeared in English in the 16th century:

Miles Coverdale, an associate of Tyndale, published the first complete Bible in English in 1535. John Rogers, under the pen name Thomas Matthew, published Matthew's Bible in 1537. Sir Thomas Cromwell, secretary to King Henry VIII, commissioned the production of the Great Bible in 1539, which was the first authorized English version. The Geneva Bible produced in 1560 was the first English Bible to use numbered verses. In 1568, the Bishops' Bible appeared as a revision of the Great Bible.

In 1604 King James I commissioned a translation of the whole Bible, as close as it can be to the original languages, to be used in all churches of England during worship. About 54 scholars worked in six groups. The translation work was started in 1607 and was completed in 1611. The New Testament portion of this new version was mostly an adaptation of Tyndale's work. The King James Version remained as the most popular Bible in English for nearly two and a half centuries since its original publication. The first revision of the King James Ver-

Page from 1611  
edition of the King  
James Version.





sion (the Revised Version) was completed in 1885, followed by the *American Standard Version* in 1901. The *Revised Standard Version*, a revision of the *American Standard Version*, was completed in 1952. More recent attempts in Bible translation include the *New American Standard Bible* (1960), *The Jerusalem Bible* (1966), the *New International Version* (1978), the *New King James Version* (1982), *The New Jerusalem Bible* (1985), the *New Revised Standard Version* (1990), and the *New Living Translation* (1996).

Two theories of translation guide the work of translators who aim to produce English translations of the Bible in our day. The first theory calls for a word-for-word (literal) translation that preserves as much as possible the original word order and sentence structure. This *formal equivalence* method, though it is the more desirable way for the average reader to get closer to the original texts of the Bible, is often difficult to accomplish. Since thought forms and sentence structure vary from language to language, it is very difficult to maintain a strict adherence to this theory. Even the most faithful literal translations to a certain extent must modify sentence structure and arrive at the meaning of words that seems most appropriate to the context. The *New American Standard Bible* is the closest example of a literal translation. The second method calls for *dynamic equivalence* or thought-for-thought translation, which requires the use of modern idioms and thought forms to convey the message most authentically and accurately to the modern readers. The *New Living Translation* utilizes this method through-

out the translation process, in which even the cultural expressions are translated into modern idioms. The *New International Version*, the *New Revised Standard Version*, and the *New King James Version* represent translations that utilize elements of both word-for-word and thought-for-thought methods of translation.

## The Covenant Community

It is a serious mistake to assume that one can understand the Bible simply by studying its literary characteristics and its historical background. The books of the Bible were not written to inform people; they were written to transform people. Though the Bible is full of fascinating historical, literary, and even theological details that are worthy of study, as God's Word, its purpose is to form people into a community of fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ. The Bible continues to be a primary source of influence in the world today through the theological truths it proclaims and through its vision of a transformed human society.

The process of canonization of the Bible makes it clear that it is the product of a community of faith. Not only did the people of God in ancient times discern as a community of faith which books belonged in the Old and the New Testaments and which books would not be included, but they also recognized the truth that these books were written to and for their life and faith as covenant communities. Every book of the Bible portrays in some way a picture of what the covenant people of God should look like. What the people of God believe, how they

live their lives in community, and how they witness their faith to the world—these are fundamental questions addressed by the Bible.

The faith, life in community, and prophetic witness in the world of the Church is neither generic nor formless. The community of faith is a specific, intentional, and structured community. Specifically the Church that gave form to the New Testament and was formed by the New Testament understood itself to be in continuity with the Old Testament people of God, the covenant community of Israel. The authors of the New Testament believed that God's saving activity in the Old Testament was part of the story and preparation for God's saving activity in Christ. The covenant that God made with Israel was not rejected or laid aside with the coming of Christ. It was renewed and through the Holy Spirit internalized into human hearts. Thus the community of faith that forms in and through the New Testament does not regard itself as a completely new thing. Rather, it is the logical outcome of what God had been doing through salvation history in response to both human rejection and acceptance of His grace.

Old Testament Israel understood herself to be bound to God by the covenant of Mount Sinai. That covenant came into being because of God's saving works for Israel. The covenant envisioned a people whose life together and whose lives individually would reflect the holiness of the God to whom they were bound. This vision created expectations for the people of God, and the covenant laid out the consequences of living up to those expectations or failing to accomplish them.

In a similar fashion the Church of the New Testament understood that they were part of a covenant community in continuity with Israel. The renewal of that covenant came into being because of God's saving work for them in Christ. The New Testament envisions a people whose life together and whose lives individually reflect the holiness and the love of the God who revealed himself in Christ. That vision creates expectations for the covenant community, and the New Testament, especially the letters and Revelation, describes the consequences of the Church's living up to or failing to live up to God's vision for them.

Central to this concept of covenant is the community of faith. Neither the Old nor the New Testament envisions faith as a purely private matter. Though an individual's relationship with God is intensely personal, it is always lived out in community. Individual believers recognize their life together in worship, instruction, and ministry as the context for their personal relationship with God. There are many places in the New Testament where the word *Christ* refers to Jesus as a historical individual who was crucified and raised from the dead. There are many other places where the word *Christ* means the Church, the Body of Christ, the community expression of Christ. This community is a nurturing community that invites and challenges its members to become like Christ. The Bible is the road map to that covenant way of life, and it invites anyone who encounters God's Word to enter into that covenant community.

## Summary Statements

- Revelation and inspiration played a key role in the making of the Bible.
- Biblical books show the unity and continuity of the history of salvation.
- The Bible came into being through a long and complex process of manuscript development.
- Biblical books are arranged under various major sections, such as Law, Prophets, Writings, Gospels, letters, and prophecy.
- The process of canonization helped establish the authenticity and authority of the biblical books.
- Bible translation has been an ongoing part of the history of the people of God in the Old and New Testament times.
- Biblical books inform the people of God how to live the covenant way of life.

## Questions for Reflection

1. How does the structure of the New Testament reflect its “real-to-life” character and its applicability?
2. To what degree do you see the direction of God in the process of canonization? What conclusions do you make about the nature of the canon?
3. In what ways have you experienced life in a covenant community like that which produced and was produced by the New Testament? In what ways has your life in the church lacked elements of a covenant community?

## Resources for Further Study

Ewert, David. *From Ancient Tablets to Modern Translations: A General Introduction to the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983.

Metzger, Bruce M. *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1987.

Wegner, Paul D. *The Journey from Texts to Translations: The Origin and Development of the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999.

Willimon, William H. *Shaped by the Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1990.