

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 43: How We Got Our Bible, Canon to King James

How We Got Our Bible: Did You Know?

Little-known and remarkable facts about the history of the Bible

David M. Scholer is professor of New Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. He is author of *A Basic Bibliographic Guide for New Testament Exegesis* (Eerdmans, 1973).

The oldest surviving manuscript of any part of the New Testament is a papyrus fragment containing verses from John 18; scholars estimate it was written about 125.

We may have sayings of Jesus that are not recorded in the four Gospels. They come from books that never made it into the New Testament but which nonetheless contain some reliable historical information. Extra-biblical sayings that might be from the lips of Jesus: "The one who is near me is near the fire; the one who is far from me is far from the kingdom"; "There shall be divisions and heresies"; "No one can obtain the kingdom of heaven who has not passed through temptation."

Many early Christians, to discover the answer to a problem, would randomly open the Bible, read the first line their eye fell upon, and consider it a divine message for them. So popular was this practice, it had to be repeatedly condemned by early church councils.

The word **Bible** comes from the Greek word for "papyrus plant" (**biblos**), since the leaves of that plant were used for paper.

In the ancient and medieval worlds, some Christians memorized large portions of Scripture. Eusebius of Caesarea said he once met a blind Egyptian who "possessed whole books of the Holy Scriptures ... in his heart."

The Roman Catholic Bible is larger than the Protestant, but the largest Bible in Christendom belongs to the Ethiopic church. It contains the Old Testament Apocrypha and books such as Jubilees, 1 Enoch, Joseph Ben Gurion's medieval history of the Jews and other nations, Ethiopic Clement, and the Ethiopic Book of the Covenant.

The cost of a Bible in the 1300s might easily amount to a priest's whole yearly income.

The medieval church did not object to Bible translations; by the early 1500s, there were Bibles in most European languages. But the church opposed the work of Wycliffe and Tyndale because these translators held "radical" views.

When English Bibles were first published, people were fascinated with them. One Essex man recalled that "poor men bought the New Testament of Jesus Christ and on Sundays did sit reading in the lower end of the church, and many would flock about them to hear their reading."

As Erasmus was pulling together his celebrated Greek New Testament (1516), he could find no ancient Greek manuscripts of the last six verses of Revelation. So he made his own "backward" translation—from Latin back into Greek! For centuries, in fact, some Greek New Testaments still concluded with Erasmus's Latin-to-Greek translation of these verses.

The Bible's chapter divisions were created in the early 1200s by a lecturer at the University of Paris. Its

current verse divisions were not fully developed until 1551.

Martin Luther translated the New Testament into German in a blitz of only 11 weeks.

Tyndale's translation introduced many new words into the English language, such as ***longsuffering***, ***peacemaker***, ***scapegoat***, ***filthy lucre***, and even the word ***beautiful***.

William Tyndale's first English New Testament, finished in 1525, had to be printed outside of England and then smuggled back inside barrels of flour and bolts of cloth. Catholic bishop Tunstall of London bought up most of Tyndale's first edition in order to stamp out Tyndale's "heresy"—but the proceeds financed new editions!

When the King James Version was published in 1611, the Geneva Bible was by far the most popular English Bible. It was the Geneva translation, not the King James, that was used by William Shakespeare and the early American Puritans.

Copyright © 1994 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

How We Got Our Bible: From the Editor - Reading the Bible Backwards

Mark Galli, managing Editor

A stunning panel from the St. John Altar on Patmos, painted in 1518, shows the apostle John in lush, tropical surrounding, gazing up at a cloud from which a figure of God gives forth a stream of light. John, pen in hand, sits ready to write his Revelation. The painting dramatically pictures what we at Christian History believe: All Scripture is inspired by God.

Yet we also know that God usually works through history to accomplish his will. This is certainly true when it comes to the Bible. The Bible is not only a history of divine action in the world, it is also a divine book with a history of its own, a sometimes violent and controversial history.

The history of the Bible is such an immense topic, we've been able only to glance at the Middle Ages, and we've stopped with the Authorized or King James Version. Still, we've tried to capture the history of the Bible as a mystery to be solved, seeking answers to ever deeper questions.

We begin with the more recent and familiar, "The Crown of English Bibles"—a look at the King James and earlier English versions, going back to John Wycliffe's. The curious, of course, ask, "But what happened with the Bible before Wycliffe?" So, "The Gallery" gives a glimpse of the Bible's leading players in the early church and Middle Ages.

The more curious still look further back: How did Christian scholars know which ancient books were to be regarded as Christian Scripture? Click on "A Testament is Born" to find a fascinating answer to this knotty question. Going back even further, one wonders how we determined which books belong in the first half of our Bible. "How We Got Our Old Testament" gives a succinct explanation.

Finally, we try to answer the most basic questions—about the very papyrus and vellum upon which biblical words were copied. "Discovering the Oldest New Testaments" and "From the Apostles to You" offer some intriguing answers.

And that will likely elicit even more questions—and perhaps a sense of awe that God, in his providence, has preserved his Word through the many twists and turns and rapids of history.

P.S. Be sure to look for the "How We Got Our Bible" documentary/curriculum, produced by Ken Curtis, founder of Christian History. The series was released in early 1995 and is an excellent resource for churches and study groups. Call Gateway Films (1-800-523-0226) for more information.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 43: How We Got Our Bible, Canon to King James

The Crown of English Bibles

The King James Version was the culmination of 200 turbulent years of Bible translation.

Tony Lane is senior lecturer in Christian doctrine at London Bible College. He is author of the *Lion Book of Christian Thought* (1992) and an editorial adviser for *CHRISTIAN HISTORY*

Without the King James Version of the Bible, one writer speculated, "There would be no Paradise Lost ... no Pilgrim's Progress ... no Negro spirituals, no Address at Gettysburg." Another imagined what would happen if the KJV were to suddenly disappear: "People would not know what the great [English and American] writers were talking about."

But the King James Version hasn't disappeared. Even though today there are more accurate and contemporary translations of the Bible, the KJV holds sovereign place in the English-speaking world: it continues to be printed and circulated more widely than any other version.

How did this remarkable work originate? Did King James sit down and write it, as some have imagined? In fact, it was the work of fifty-some scholars following more than two hundred turbulent years of translating the Bible into English.

Wycliffe Bible without Wycliffe

English translations of portions of the Bible go back about as far as the English language itself. King Alfred the Great (d. 901) began a translation of the Psalms, and in the tenth century, the Gospels were translated into various regional dialects.

The first attempt to translate the complete Bible into English, though, is associated with fourteenth-century theologian John Wycliffe.

Toward the end of his life, Wycliffe became critical of the established church (see "The Fiery Man behind the First English Bible,"), and as a result, in 1381 he was removed from his post at Oxford University. He withdrew to the church in Lutterworth, where he was surrounded by disciples who began to translate the Bible into English, certainly under his inspiration and probably at his bidding. There is no evidence Wycliffe took part in the actual work of translation.

The church did not approve of the translation, but not primarily because it was in English. There were already English translations of parts of the Bible, and copies of the Wycliffe translation were legally owned by nobles and clergy.

The main problem was that it was the Wycliffe Bible: it was distributed by his followers (the "heretical" Lollards) and used to attack the teachings and practices of the church. In addition, the church was concerned about the effect of Bible reading upon the uneducated laity. The Bible was best left to the eyes of educated clergy, since salvation was mediated through the teachings of the church and the clergy-led sacraments.

Copies of Wycliffe's books and his Bible translation were burned, as were some of his

followers. The pressure was so great, moreover, that some, like translators Nicholas of Hereford and John Purvey, recanted.

The desire for the Bible in English is shown by the many manuscripts of the Wycliffe Bible that survive—nearly 200—despite attempts by the church to destroy it and to harass people who read it.

Getting Back to the Greek

But the Wycliffe Bible was far from perfect; it had been translated not from the original Hebrew and Greek but from the Latin translation known as the Vulgate. In 1516, with the publication of Erasmus's Greek New Testament, the time was ripe for an English translation from the original biblical languages.

Into this situation came William Tyndale. Tyndale had studied at both Oxford and Cambridge, and he had experienced firsthand the ignorance of some local clergy. To one cleric, he reportedly declared, "If God spare my life, ere many years, I will cause a boy that driveth the plough to know more of the Scripture than thou dost."

Tyndale hoped to receive official patronage for this task, and in 1523, he approached Bishop Tunstall of London, a scholar and a friend of Erasmus. But with the new threat of Protestantism, the church hierarchy was not disposed to allow a vernacular translation of the Bible. Tunstall let Tyndale understand, as Tyndale later put it, "not only that there was no room in my lord of London's palace to translate the New Testament, but also that there was no place to do it in all England."

With the sponsorship of some wealthy merchants, Tyndale left for Germany, where he completed the New Testament in two years. After only a few pages had been printed in Cologne, however, the city senate halted the printing. Tyndale hastened to the city of Worms, where 6,000 copies were printed. By April 1526, they were selling in England.

Of these 6,000 copies, only two survive. This is in part because Bishop Tunstall, through an intermediary, bought the remaining stock in order to have them burned. Ironically, this money paid off Tyndale's debts and financed a new and corrected edition!

Tyndale reprinted his New Testament a number of times while he started on the Old Testament. In 1530 he published his translation of the Pentateuch, with a revised edition of Genesis appearing in 1534. Tyndale also translated Jonah and all of the books from Joshua to 2 Chronicles, but he did not live to see them through the press.

Tyndale translated directly from the Greek and Hebrew (with the help of grammars and Latin and German translations). He is truly the father of the English Bible: some 90 percent of his words passed into the King James Version and about 75 percent into the Revised Standard Version.

Tyndale's translation was also unpopular with church authorities. It was unauthorized and had not been made from the Vulgate, the official version. Furthermore, Tyndale had abandoned traditional terms, substituting "repent" for "do penance," "congregation" for "church," and "elder" for "priest."

In addition, Tyndale had included strongly Lutheran prefaces to various books (some being translations of Luther himself) and strongly Protestant marginal notes, some of which sharply criticized the Catholic church. In the margin of Exodus 32:5–7, for example, where

the people are told not to bring any more offerings for the building of the tabernacle because they have contributed enough, the note reads, "When will the Pope say 'Hoo! [Hold!]' and forbid an offering for the building of St. Peter's Church?"

Tyndale lived with English merchants in Antwerp, a position of comparative safety. In 1535, however, he was betrayed by a fellow Englishman and arrested. After a year and a half of imprisonment, he was strangled and burned at the stake in Brussels, on October 6, 1536. It is reported that his last words were "Lord! Open the King of England's eyes."

The Great and Not So Great

Tyndale's final prayer had, in a manner of speaking, already been answered. In 1534 the Church of England had broken free from Rome, and that December the Canterbury Convocation petitioned the king for an English Bible. Miles Coverdale, who had once worked with Tyndale, published it in 1535.

Coverdale's Bible was more acceptable than Tyndale's because it contained no contentious prefaces or notes, and there was an obsequious dedication to the king. As with all Bibles at the time, the Apocrypha was included, but Coverdale was the first to place these books together, separated from the Old Testament, a practice followed in all subsequent Protestant English Bibles.

Parts of Coverdale's Bible were revisions of Tyndale and parts were new translations from German and Latin translations. Though far from perfect, it was the first complete edition of the Bible in English.

Still, before the King James Version would come into being, a number of other Bible translations would appear.

The next English Bible was even closer to Tyndale's: the Matthew Bible. In 1537, 1,500 copies were printed at Antwerp as the work of "Thomas Matthew." It was in fact the work of John Rogers, a friend of Tyndale who was to become the first Protestant martyr during Mary's reign. This translation included around 2,000 marginal notes, some of which were controversial (though less sharp in tone than Tyndale's).

In 1538 Henry VIII required clergy to set up in each parish church "one book of the whole Bible of the largest volume in English." Henry was probably referring to the Great Bible, but as that edition had been delayed, the Matthew Bible was the first used in the churches.

The Great Bible was the first officially commissioned English Bible. It was planned by Thomas Cromwell with the approval of Archbishop Cranmer. Miles Coverdale, the editor, was to produce a Bible based upon the Hebrew and Greek, which meant that he revised not his own translation but the Matthew Bible.

The few notes included were solely for clarification, but this Bible had a controversial beginning. When the first edition was being printed in Paris, the Inquisitor General confiscated the copies. After negotiations, it was agreed that the manuscripts, the paper, and the type could go to London, but the confiscated sheets were not returned. Thus the appearance of the Great Bible in England was delayed until 1539, and copies were sold unbound.

A "Hotter" Translation

When the Roman Catholic Mary came to the throne (1553), many Protestants fled to the Continent. The more militantly Protestant went to Geneva, where they produced a new translation, the Geneva Bible.

The 1560 Geneva Bible was a considerable improvement on earlier translations. The translators were able linguists who made their revision in the light of the original languages and many of the best scholarly aids available. The marginal notes, while mild compared with Tyndale's, were firmly, some said hotly, Protestant. Later versions were decidedly anti-Catholic: A 1595 edition added notes that the beast coming out of the bottomless pit in Revelation 11:7 is "the Pope which hath his power out of hell and cometh thence."

The Geneva Bible, sometimes called the "hotter" Protestant version, was reprinted in no fewer than 140 complete or partial editions. It was the first Bible to be printed in Scotland (1579) and became the version appointed to be read in the Scottish churches.

Geneva's Failed Competitor

When Elizabeth came to the throne in 1558, she required every parish church to have an English Bible. The Geneva Bible was not acceptable because of its controversial marginal notes.

In 1561, Archbishop Parker of Canterbury proposed a new translation. Completed in 1566, it came to be known as the Bishops' Bible, since all the translators either were or became bishops. This was basically a revision of the Great Bible, with some guidance coming from the Geneva Bible. Though an improvement on the former, it fell short of the latter. Thus while it received official sanction, it failed to displace the Geneva Bible in popularity.

Catholic Response

During the reign of Protestant Elizabeth, English Roman Catholics wanted to fight the Protestants on their own ground and not be forced to read Protestant translations.

So a translation was begun at a college for exiled English priests, at Douai, France, in 1568. The work, which later was done in Rheims, and later still again in Douai, was done by Gregory Martin, who translated two chapters daily, starting with the Old Testament. His work was then revised by two other scholars.

The New Testament was the first to appear in print, in 1582 at Rheims. Its lengthy doctrinal notes attacked the "intolerable ignorance and importunity of the heretics of this time." Due to lack of funds, the Old Testament did not appear for another twenty years, too late to influence the KJV.

Though it made use of much modern scholarship, the Douai-Rheims translation was made from the Latin Vulgate which, in the view of the editors, was "truer than the vulgar Greek text." Also, the translation was literal, in opposition to the Protestants' "presumptuous boldness and liberty in translating." In places, then, it was unintelligible to those unfamiliar with Latin.

The Crown of Translations

Queen Elizabeth was succeeded in 1603 by James I (who was already King James VI of

Scotland). Within a year, the Puritan party in the English Church, who wished to see it become more Reformed, met with the bishops and the new king at the Hampton Court Conference. One of their requests was for a new translation of the Bible "because those which were allowed in the reign of Henry VIII and Edward VI [and used in the Book of Common Prayer] are not answerable to the truth of the original" [i.e., they were not accurate].

The bishops were not at first in favor, but the king was. The bishop of London, Richard Bancroft, urged that if there was to be a new translation, it should have no marginal notes. To this the king agreed; he objected to the Geneva Bible because of its seditious notes, such as the comment on 2 Chronicles 15:16 that King Asa's mother should have been executed.

The King James Version was a collaborative work in a way that was not true of its predecessors. Around fifty scholars took part, divided into six groups. The text (including the Apocrypha) was divided among the groups, and each group member was required to work on the whole of its portion. The scholars' were instructed to revise the Bishops' Bible, changing it only where required by the original Hebrew or Greek, using earlier translations where these were closer to the original. In practice, the translators made extensive use of the Tyndale and Geneva Bibles and the Rheims New Testament.

When individuals had prepared their translations, they came together and agreed upon a common translation. Then a panel consisting of two members from each group met together to review the whole Bible. This thorough approach, together with the recent advances in scholarship, made the King James Bible the most accurate to that time.

It was not without its weaknesses, however. The texts chosen for translation were relatively poor, there being no discipline of textual criticism. The translators' knowledge of Hebrew was still far from perfect, and while their knowledge of classical Greek was good, they did not know much about the everyday Greek of New Testament times.

On the positive side, the marginal notes maintained a steady neutrality, doing no more than explaining difficult words. And great care was taken over the English style, so that the translation reads superbly.

Though known as the "Authorized Version," the King James Bible did not immediately supersede the Geneva Bible, which continued to be printed for more than thirty years. Even opponents of Puritanism continued for some time to use and preach from the "hotter" Geneva Bible.

Eventually, though, the King James Version became the standard version of English-speaking Protestantism, at least until the 1880s with the publication of the Revised Version. Together with Shakespeare, the King James Version is one of the great formative influences upon the English language.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 43: How We Got Our Bible, Canon to King James

The Fiery Man Behind the First English Bible

Stephen Miller

John Wycliffe left quite an impression on the church: 43 years after his death, officials dug up his body, burned his remains, and threw the ashes into a river!

It was an unlikely end for a tiny man who had been born in the hinterlands, on a sheep farm 200 miles from London. But by about age 30, Wycliffe was on the faculty of Oxford, where he developed into a brilliant and proud theologian. There his attacks on the church paved the way for the Reformation 150 years later.

When the church demanded financial support from England, a nation struggling to raise money to resist a possible French attack, Wycliffe advised Parliament not to comply. He argued that the church was already too wealthy and that Christ called his disciples to poverty, not wealth.

Wycliffe rejected as unbiblical the doctrine of transubstantiation, which says that during Mass the bread and wine become in substance the body and blood of Jesus.

Wycliffe even criticized the pope. When Urban VI and Clement VII were each claiming to be pope and excommunicating each other, Urban called for war. Wycliffe replied, "How dare he make the token of Christ on the cross (which is the token of peace, mercy, and charity) a banner to lead us to slay Christian men, for the love of two false priests!"

The pope, Wycliffe said, was not the voice of God on earth. The Bible was. The pope, he added, may not even be among those chosen for heaven.

His respect for the authority of Scripture drove Wycliffe to promote an English translation of the Bible. The church bitterly opposed it: "By this translation, the Scriptures have become vulgar, and they are more available to lay, and even to women who can read, than they were to learned scholars, who have a high intelligence. So the pearl of the gospel is scattered and trodden underfoot by swine."

Wycliffe replied, "Englishmen learn Christ's law best in English. Moses heard God's law in his own tongue, so did Christ's apostles."

In spite of five papal bulls (edicts) ordering Wycliffe's arrest, his friends protected him, and he was never in his lifetime convicted as a heretic.

Copyright © 1994 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 43: How We Got Our Bible, Canon to King James

What the English Bible Cost One Man

Tyndale's comfort to persecuted Bible readers

Mark Galli is managing editor of CHRISTIAN HISTORY.

William Tyndale studied at Oxford and Cambridge. He could speak seven languages and was proficient in Hebrew and Greek. He was a priest whose intellectual gifts and disciplined life could have taken him a long way in the church, had he not had one compulsion: to teach English men and women the good news of justification by faith.

Tyndale had discovered the freedom and joy of this doctrine when he read Erasmus's Greek edition of the New Testament. What better way to share this message with English men and women than to put an English copy of the New Testament into their hands? This was not a passing fancy but became Tyndale's life passion, aptly expressed by his mentor, Erasmus, in the preface to his Greek New Testament: "Christ desires his mysteries to be published abroad as widely as possible. I would that [the Gospels and the epistles of Paul] were translated into all languages, of all Christian people, and that they might be read and known."

It would be a passion, though, for which Tyndale would pay dearly.

Fleeing Home

He began decently and in order: in 1523, he sought permission and funds from the bishop of London to translate the New Testament. The bishop's answer was no, a telling no. Further queries in England convinced Tyndale that the project would not be welcomed by authorities anywhere in his land. So he left England for the free cities of Europe—Hamburg, Wittenberg, Cologne, Worms, and Antwerp—some place where he could translate and publish an English Bible.

From the Lutheran city of Worms, in 1525, his New Testament emerged—the first translation from Greek into English. It was quickly smuggled into England, where it received a less-than-enthusiastic response from the authorities. King Henry VIII, Cardinal Wolsey, and Sir Thomas More, among others, were furious. It was, said More, "not worthy to be called Christ's testament, but either Tyndale's own testament or the testament of his master Antichrist."

Copies of his translation were bought up and burned, and plans were hatched to silence the troublesome translator.

Betrayal

Tyndale soon moved to Antwerp, a city in which he was relatively free from both English agents and those of the Holy Roman (and Catholic) Empire. For nine years he managed, with the help of friends, to evade authorities as he revised his New Testament and began translating the Old.

He also gave himself methodically to good works because, as he said, "My part be not in Christ if mine heart be not to follow and live according as I teach." On Mondays he visited others who had fled England because of religious persecution. On Saturdays he walked the streets, seeking in Antwerp's nooks and crannies poor people he could minister to. On Sundays he would dine in a merchant's home, reading

Scripture before and after dinner. The rest of the week was devoted to writing tracts and books and translating the Bible.

We do not know who exactly planned and financed the plot that interrupted this routine—probably high-ranking English bishops. We do know it was carried out by Henry Phillips, a man who had been accused of robbing his father and of gambling himself into poverty.

Phillips managed to pick up Tyndale's trail in Antwerp and wormed his way into Tyndale's life. Thomas Poyntz, Tyndale's associate and close friend, distrusted Phillips but could not convince Tyndale to avoid him. Phillips became Tyndale's guest at meals. Soon he was one of the few privileged to look at Tyndale's books and papers.

In May 1535, Phillips found a way to lure Tyndale away from the safety of his quarters at the English House of Antwerp, a house set aside for traveling English merchants. While slipping through a narrow alley, Tyndale walked into the arms of a band of soldiers whom Phillips had posted. He was immediately taken to the Castle of Vilvorde, the great state prison of the Low Countries, and accused of heresy.

Trials for heresy in the Netherlands were in the hands of special commissioners of the Holy Roman Empire. Based on other cases, we can draw a fairly accurate picture of the course of events Tyndale would endure. The trial would be carried out completely in private; the prisoner would not appear in public until the commissioners were ready to announce a verdict. It would take months for the law to take its course—while Tyndale lay in the cells of Vilvorde, languishing in loneliness, cold, and poverty, cut off from news and from friends.

Tyndale's Final Words *were a prayer*.

A Friend's Desperate Efforts

His arrest was in some sense a threat to the safety of all English merchants, who were supposedly safe from local authorities. So some merchants petitioned the Court of Brussels on Tyndale's behalf. In the end, the merchants couldn't deny that he was a heretic in the eyes of the law—and the laws against heresy had become ever more stringent.

Thomas Poyntz, Tyndale's close friend, was the most diligent in trying to secure Tyndale's release. He asked Lord Cromwell to apply political pressure upon the Low Countries. Tyndale, after all, was an English subject. But Cromwell was slow to move. His king, Henry VIII, was no friend of Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor. But he knew that King Henry had no love for Tyndale and would not grieve his death.

Letters from Cromwell eventually reached Flanders in September, asking for Tyndale's extradition as a diplomatic favor. But it was left to Poyntz to press the affair with the authorities, which he did, at the expense of his business and personal life. His heroic efforts paid off: he was told, at last, that Tyndale would be set free.

Afflictions in Prison

At this news, Tyndale's betrayer, Henry Phillips, seeing his plot beginning to unravel, went to the authorities and accused Poyntz of heresy. Poyntz was seized and placed in prison, where he remained for three months. In February 1536, he managed to escape, but he was forced to flee from Antwerp, leaving behind his business, his goods, and his wife. His life would never be the same. For Tyndale, Poyntz's exile was fatal: it essentially brought all effort on Tyndale's behalf to a standstill.

We know little of Tyndale's affairs in his lonely prison cell. According to John Foxe, a contemporary of Tyndale, "Such was the power of his doctrine and the sincerity of his life that ... he converted his keeper, the keeper's daughter, and others of his household."

There is also one letter, written in Latin, in Tyndale's hand, that was found in Belgium last century. It bears no date nor name of place, but there can be little doubt that it was sent from his prison cell to the governor of the castle in the winter months of 1535. It tells us a great deal about the conditions in which he lived.

In contemporary translation, it reads, "I beg your lordship ... by the Lord Jesus, that if I am to remain here through the winter, you will request the commissary to have the kindness to send me, from the goods of mine which he has, a warmer cap; for I suffer greatly from cold in the head, and am afflicted by a perpetual catarrh, which is much increased in this cell; a warmer coat also, for this which I have is very thin; a piece of cloth, too, to patch my leggings. My overcoat is worn out; my shirts are also worn out. ...

"And I ask to be allowed to have a lamp in the evening; it is indeed wearisome sitting alone in the dark. But most of all, I beg and beseech your clemency to be urgent with the commissary, that he will kindly permit me to have the Hebrew Bible, Hebrew grammar, and Hebrew dictionary, that I may pass the time in that study."

More than one historian has noted the likeness to Paul, who while languishing in prison asked Timothy for his cloak, his books, and his parchments (2 Tim. 4:13).

Dying Words Answered ***Two years after Tyndale prayed, "Lord, open the King of England's eyes," King Henry VIII required each parish church to have "one book [copy] of the whole Bible of the largest volume in English." As shown here, these Bibles attracted great attention and even had to be chained to keep them from being stolen.***

Trial and Death

Was Tyndale's request allowed? Did he continue work on his translation of the Old Testament? We do not know. Winter passed, and one more attempt was made to release Tyndale, but it was too late. Tyndale was already in the tedium of trial.

The trial was carried out in writing, and months were spent in a paper debate between Tyndale and the Roman Catholic inquisitors. The first step was to frame a formal accusation, to which Tyndale would reply. Then a series of papers were passed back and forth as Tyndale's doctrines were brought up one by one.

It was not until summer that the trial came to its climax. Then, early in August 1536, Tyndale was condemned as a heretic, degraded from the priesthood, and delivered to the secular authorities for punishment.

The rite of degradation took place separately from the punishment for heresy. A typical degradation was held in a church or town square, the local bishops sitting upon a high platform for all to see. Tyndale likely would have been led in, clad in the vestments of the priesthood, and made to kneel. His hands were scraped with a knife or piece of glass, as if scraping away the oil he had been anointed with; bread and wine were placed in his hands and taken away. Last, his vestments were stripped from him one by one, and he was clothed in lay garments. Then the presiding bishop handed him over to the secular officer for punishment.

Two months later, on the morning of Friday, October 6, it was the secular authorities' turn. We have but one brief description of Tyndale's execution. From descriptions of others like it, we can surmise that the execution took place in a public square, in the middle of which two great beams were set up in the form of a cross, standing about the height of a man. At the top, iron chains were fastened, and there were holes through which a rope of hemp was passed. Brushwood and logs lay at the base.

After local officials took their seats, Tyndale was brought to the cross and given a chance to recant. That refused, he was given a moment to pray. John Foxe says that he cried out, "Lord, open the King of England's eyes!"

Then he was bound to the beam, and both an iron chain and a rope were put around his neck. Gunpowder was added to the brush and logs. At the signal of a local official, the executioner, standing behind Tyndale, quickly tightened the noose, strangling him. Then an official took up a lighted torch and handed it to the executioner, who set the wood ablaze.

One other brief report of that distant scene has come down to us. It is found in a letter from an English agent to Lord Cromwell two months later.

"They speak much," he wrote, "of the patient sufferance of Master Tyndale at the time of his execution."

Copyright © 1994 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 43: How We Got Our Bible, Canon to King James

Reading a Banned Book

Tyndale's comfort to persecuted Bible readers

Let it not make thee despair, neither yet discourage thee, O reader, that it is forbidden thee in pain of life and goods, or that it is made breaking of the king's peace, or treason unto his highness, to read the Word of thy soul's health; ... for if God be on our side, what matter maketh it who be against us, be they bishops, cardinals, popes ...

Five Objections: Answered

1. They tell you that Scripture ought not to be in the mother tongue, but that is only because they fear the light, and desire to lead you blindfold and in captivity...
2. They say that Scripture needs a pure and quiet mind, and that laymen are too cumbered with worldly business to understand it. This weapon strikes themselves: for who is so tangled with worldly matters as the prelates?
3. They say that laymen would interpret it each after his own way. Why then do the curates not teach the people the right way? The Scripture would be a basis for such teaching and a test of it. At present their lives and their teaching are so contrary that the people do not believe them, even when they preach truth...
4. They say our tongue is too rude. It is not so. Greek and Hebrew go more easily into English than into Latin. Has not God made the English tongue as well as others? They suffer you to read in English of Robin Hood, Bevis of Hampton, Hercules, Troilus, and a thousand ribald or filthy tales. It is only the Scripture that is forbidden. It is therefore clearer than the sun that this forbiddal is not "for love of your souls, which they care for as the fox doth for the geese."
5. They say we need doctors to interpret Scripture [because] it is so hard... There are errors even in Origen and Augustine; how can we test them save by the Scripture?... We do not wish to abolish teaching and to make every man his own master, but if the curates will not teach the gospel, the layman must have the Scripture, and read it for himself, taking God for his teacher.

Copyright © 1994 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 43: How We Got Our Bible, Canon to King James

The Difference a Translation Makes

Early attempts to capture Psalm 23.

Wycliffe Bible (Purvey Edition, 1388)

The Lord gouerneth me, and no thing schal faile to me;
in the place of pasture there he hath set me.

He nurshide me on the watir of refreischyng;
he conuertide my soule.

He ledde me forth on the pathis of rightfulness; for his name.

For whi though Y schal go in the myddis of schadewe of deeth;
Y schal not drede yuels, for thou art with me.

Thi yerde and thi staf; tho han coumfortid me.

Thou hast maad redi a boord in my sight;
agens hem that troblen me.

Thou hast made fat myn heed with oyle;
and my cuppe, fillinge greetli, is ful clear.

And thi merci schal sue me; in alle the daies of my lijf.

And that Y dwelle in the hows of the Lord; in to the lengthe of daies.

Coverdale Bible (1535)

The Lorde is my shepherde, I can wante nothinge.

He fedeth me in a grene pasture,

and ledeth me to a fresh water.

He quickeneth my soule,

& bringeth me forth in the waye of rightuousnes for his names sake.

Though I shulde walke now in the valley of the shadowe of death,
yet I feare no euell,
for thou art with me:
thy staffe & thy shepehoke comforte me.

Thou preparest a table before me agaynst mine enemies:
thou annoyntest my heade with oyle,
& fyllest my cuppe full.

Oh let thy louynge kyndnes & mercy folowe me all the dayes off my life,
that I maye dwell in the house off the Lorde for euer.

Bishop's Bible (1568)

God is my sheephearde, therfore I can lacke nothyng:
he wyll cause me to repose my selfe in pasture full of grasse,
and he wyll leade me vnto calme waters.

He wyll conuert my soule:
he wyll bring me foorth into the pathes of righteousnesse for his name sake.

Yea though I walke through the valley of the shadowe of death,
I wyll feare no euyll:
for thou art with me, thy rodde and thy staffe be the thynges that do comfort me.

Thou wylt prepare a table before me in the presence of myne aduersaries:
thou hast annoynted my head with oyle,
and my cup shalbe brymme full. Truely felicitie and mercie shal folowe me all the dayes of my lyfe:
and I wyll dwell in the house of God for a long tyme.

King James Bible (1611)

The LORD is my shepheard, I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie downe in greene pastures:

he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soule:

he leadeth me in the pathes of righteousnes, for his names sake.

Yea though I walke through the valley of the shadowe of death,

I will feare no euill:

for thou art with me, thy rod and thy staffe, they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me, in the presence of mine enemies:

thou anointest my head with oyle,

my cuppe runneth ouer.

Surely goodnes and mercie shall followe me all the daies of my life:

and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for euer.

Copyright © 1994 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 43: How We Got Our Bible, Canon to King James

How We Got Our Bible: A Gallery of Mavericks & Misfits

The key players in the history of the Bible haven't necessarily been popular—or orthodox.

Stephen M. Miller is a free-lance writer, formerly editor of Illustrated Bible Life. He is a consulting editor of CHRISTIAN HISTORY.

Marcion

(c. 85–c. 160)

Catalyst for a New Testament

The reason Christians have 27 books in their New Testament, some scholars say, is partly because early church leaders didn't like the 12 that Marcion had compiled. They didn't care much for Marcion, either.

Famous bishop Polycarp called Marcion "the firstborn of Satan." Justin Martyr said this wealthy shipbuilder "taught men to deny that God is the maker of all things." Tertullian said he was "more savage than the beasts of that barbarous region" where he grew up, in what is now northern Turkey.

The lowest blow, which many scholars discount, came from Hippolytus. He said Marcion was excommunicated by his father for seducing a virgin. Then again, the sect Marcion later established would baptize only believers who vowed to remain celibate.

Marcion insisted on this because he said there were two Gods: the harsh, Creator God of the Old Testament and the loving God revealed in Jesus. Procreation, Marcion explained, was the idea of the Creator God, and Marcion wanted nothing to do with him.

To further distance themselves from this God, Marcionites fasted and shunned worldly goods. A fifth-century writer told of meeting a 90-year-old Marcionite who washed every morning in his own spit so he could avoid using the water provided by the Creator.

Marcion wrote ***Antithesis*** to convince people there were two Gods. He pointed out that Jesus said, "No good tree bears bad fruit" (Luke 6:43). Meanwhile, though, the Old Testament God openly admitted, "I bring prosperity and create disaster" (Isaiah 45:7).

Some scholars estimate that by the time Marcion died, when his church was at its peak of popularity, more than half of Christianity was under the sway of Marcionite teaching.

Their Bible—the first "New Testament"—was the one Marcion compiled after he was excommunicated in a.d. 144, at the age of about 60.

Marcion's Bible rejected the Old Testament with its heroes and prophets; they had been deceived by the Creator, he believed. He also rejected all New Testament references that suggested the Creator and the loving God were the same. In the end, his Bible included only the Gospel of Luke and some letters of Paul.

Two hundred years later, the sect was nearly extinct. But it had prodded the church to begin defining what Christians should believe and what books should be called the Word of God.

Origen

(c. 185–c. 254)

Respected Bible scholar—yet unorthodox teacher

When Origen's father was beheaded during an intense persecution of Christians, 17-year-old Origen was ready to die as a martyr, too. But his mother hid his clothes so he couldn't leave the house. Thus, she saved the life of a teenager who would become the most respected Bible scholar of his day. His interpretation of Scripture has influenced Christians throughout the ages, in spite of his being condemned by the church about 300 years following his death.

After the Romans confiscated his family's estate in Alexandria, Egypt, it was up to Origen to support his mother and eight younger brothers and sisters. Well educated, he was able to earn money teaching religion to converts. His classes became so popular, he had to hire an assistant.

Sometime during the 30 years he taught there, he reportedly had himself castrated—to curb suspicion about his teaching of women. Some historians say this shows how literally he took Matthew 19:12, which speaks of men becoming eunuchs who "renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven." Roman records tell of other Christian men who embraced celibacy with such zeal.

Ironically, Origen is remembered as the early church theologian who preferred to focus not on the literal meaning of the Bible but on its allegorical messages. Of Christ's cleansing of the temple, for example, Origen argued it never took place; he said it was not the kind of thing Jesus would do. Instead, the story symbolized Christ in the ongoing ministry of purging the church of corruption.

With the help of a team of trained word processors, Origen is said to have produced a massive 6,000 works, few of which have survived. Stenographers copied his sermons and lectures in shorthand, secretaries transcribed the notes, and calligraphers produced elegant copies.

Though Origen wrote commentaries and the first known systematic theology, his most famous work was **Hexapla**, a kind of study Bible of the Old Testament. It had six parallel columns, one of the Scripture in Hebrew, and the other five of various Greek translations.

Origen died soon after being released from prison, where he had been tortured for his faith. Three hundred years later, the second Council of Constantinople (553) attacked his followers and took issue with his unorthodox teachings: Jesus was not as divine as the Father; people existed before being born into this life; Satan will one day be saved; because of free will, creation may endure other falls from grace. Yet in spite of the flaws in his understanding, Origen is remembered as a father of Bible study.

Athanasius

(c. 296–373)

Exiled defender of orthodoxy

"Black Dwarf" is what his enemies called him. And this short, dark-skinned Egyptian bishop had plenty of enemies—enough to get him exiled five times by four Roman emperors. And enough to keep him exiled, off and on, for 17 of the 45 years he served as bishop of Alexandria.

These enemies were followers of Arius, who taught that Jesus was a created being, not of the same substance of God nor equal with him. The church council at Nicea in 325 condemned Arius as a heretic, exiled him, and made it a capital offense to possess his writings.

Three years later, the bishop of Alexandria, who had led the council, died, and Athanasius was elected to replace him. He was so young that some resisted his election, arguing he was not yet 30, the minimum age for the bishop who would lead the churches of Egypt and Libya. But the majority recognized a maturity in the man who, while still in his early 20s, had written a theological masterpiece

about the Incarnation.

Within a few months of Athanasius's election, supporters of Arius talked Emperor Constantine into recalling Arius from exile and ordering Athanasius to readmit him to the church.

Athanasius refused. "The Christ-opposing heresy has no fellowship with the catholic church," he said.

Constantine chose not to force the issue, so the Arians launched a barrage of personal attacks against Athanasius. Over the next several years, Athanasius suffered through false charges that included murder, illegal taxation, and sorcery. But it was the charge of treason that led Constantine to exile him in 335. Athanasius was accused of preventing Egyptian grain ships from sailing to the empire's capital.

Constantine may have realized this charge was as false as the others, and he may have simply decided to end the church's squabbling and to get Athanasius out of the line of fire. He banished the bishop to what is now Germany but was then the kingdom of the emperor's oldest son. In addition, Constantine refused to allow the church to elect a new bishop.

Two years later, when the emperor died, Athanasius returned. But the Arian movement had grown, and in 339, a majority of church leaders voted to depose him again, and Athanasius fled to Rome. This time he was replaced.

Though he would return in 346, he would face three more exiles in his life. He was about 70 when he came home for the last time.

In his first year back, in 367, he wrote perhaps the most important document of his 77-year life. This was his annual letter to the church. In it was a list of Christian books he said were inspired of God. Christians had long debated which books should make up the New Testament, but Athanasius's list of 27 writings marks the first time a church leader identified the very books Christians today call the New Testament.

Erasmus (c. 1469–1536) Anti-Protestant who helped start the Reformation

Desiderius Erasmus was the illegitimate son of a Dutch priest. He grew to become a reluctant cleric who, after the death of his parents, was forced into a monastery. He stayed long enough to be ordained a priest by about age 23, in the same year Columbus sailed for the New World. Erasmus, though, would explore biblical and theological worlds that would change history.

Erasmus soon grew to hate monastery life—the rigid rules and the closed-minded, intolerant theologians. He wanted to travel, to gain some academic elbow room. But he also wanted to remain an Augustinian.

A French bishop offered him a way out, taking him on as his Latin secretary, then helping fund his theological studies in Paris. From there Erasmus began a career of writing and traveling that took him to most of the countries of Europe. Though he often complained of poor health, he seemed driven by a desire to seek out the best theological minds of the day.

It was this that drew him to England six times, in spite of what he described as the island's bad beer, barbarism, and inhospitable weather. There John Colet and others inspired him to learn the Greek language, in which the New Testament was written.

The result was his most memorable work: the Greek New Testament, published in the year 1516. Accompanying it were study notes as well as his own Latin translation—a more accurate version than

Jerome's earlier Latin Vulgate.

In the preface, Erasmus said he undertook the project so everyone might read the Bible. "Would that these were translated into each and every language. ... Would that the farmer might sing snatches of Scripture at his plough, that the weaver might hum phrases of Scripture to the tune of his shuttle."

In fact, Erasmus's translation became a primary source for Martin Luther's German translation six years later, and William Tyndale's English translation three years after that.

Erasmus also wrote ***The Praise of Folly***, a book that criticized the church and encouraged Luther and others to do the same. Erasmus initially supported Luther but backed away when he saw the church begin to split. "I am not so mad," he wrote to Pope Leo X, "as to fly in the face of the Vicar of Christ."

Of the bickering and intolerance on both sides, Erasmus wrote to Luther, "Had I not seen it, nay, felt it myself, I should never have believed anyone who said theologians could become so insane."

His decision not to join the Protestants, coupled with his unwillingness to voraciously attack them, produced enemies on both sides. Five years before his death, he wrote, "Men of learning who were once warmly attached to me, and old friends, are the most dangerous of foes."

In those final years, he found comfort in solitude and study. The evening of his death, at about age 67, he repeated the plea, "Mercy, O Jesus, Lord deliver me. Lord make an end, Lord have mercy on me." He had arranged for his goods to be distributed to the poor and to students who showed promise.

Jerome (c. 342–420) Greatest translator ever?

Jerome was a brilliant, temperamental, determined, irascible scholar. He was also probably the most learned man of his age.

His parents, wealthy Christians, sent him to Rome to be educated. There Jerome became an accomplished classical scholar with an insatiable passion for learning. He traveled throughout the Roman empire, eventually becoming a member of an ascetic community in Italy.

Then Jerome, desiring to become a hermit, moved to the desert of Syria, where he had a startling dream. In it, Christ scourged him and accused him, "You are a Ciceronian, and not a Christian!" Jerome vowed to put away pagan authors like Cicero and to focus on Christian truth. For the next three years, he lived as a hermit in the desert, fasting, studying, and learning Hebrew.

Jerome returned to Rome when he was in his forties, becoming the theological adviser and secretary to Pope Damasus. However, as one historian put it, "He detested most of the Romans and did not apologize for detesting them." He lashed out against the immorality and corruption of the imperial city in general and of clerics in particular: "The only thought of such men is their clothes—are they pleasantly perfumed, do their shoes fit smoothly?"

As for taking great pride in their beards, he wrote, "If there is any holiness in a beard, nobody is holier than a goat!"

Yet in Rome he also began his greatest service to the church of Christ—translating the Bible into everyday Latin (later to be called the Vulgate, meaning "common"). Though there were Latin versions available, they varied widely in accuracy and readability, so Pope Damasus instructed Jerome to revise current translations

of the Gospels and the Psalms.

When Damasus died in 386, Jerome moved to Bethlehem, where he and a wealthy woman named Paulina established two monastic communities, one for men and another for women. Away from the politics and turmoil of Roman life, Jerome lived the monastic life he so relished and devoted himself to study and translation work, which by now had gone beyond his original commission.

Jerome believed that ignorance of the Scripture was ignorance of Christ. He exhorted, "Make knowledge of the Scripture your love and you will not love the views of the flesh."

Copyright © 1994 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 43: How We Got Our Bible, Canon to King James

How We Got Our Bible: Christian History Timeline

EARLY DEVELOPMENT

- c. 1400–400 B.C. Books of the Hebrew Old Testament written
- c. 250–200 B.C. The Septuagint, a popular Greek translation of the Old Testament, produced
- A.D. 45–85? Books of the Greek New Testament written
- 90 and 118** Councils of Jamnia give final affirmation to the Old Testament canon (39 books)
- 140-150** Marcion's heretical "New Testament" incites orthodox Christians to establish a NT canon
- 303-306** Diocletian's persecution includes confiscating and destroying New Testament Scriptures
- c. **305-310** Lucian of Antioch's Greek New Testament text; becomes a foundation for later Bibles
- 367** Athanasius's Festal Letter lists complete New Testament canon (27 books) for the first time
- 397** Council of Carthage establishes orthodox New Testament canon (27 books)
- c. **400** Jerome translates the Bible into Latin; this "Vulgate" becomes standard of medieval church

ENGLISH VERSIONS FROM LATIN

- c. **650** Caedmon, a monk, puts Bible books into verse
- c. **735** >Historian Bede translates the Gospels
- 871-899** King Alfred the Great translates the Psalms and 10 Commandments
- 950** The 7th-century Lindisfarne Gospels receive English translation
- 955-1020** Aelfric translates various Bible books
- c. **1300** Invention of eyeglasses aids copying
- c. **1325** Both Richard Rolle and William Shoreham translate psalms into metrical verse
- 1380-1382** John Wycliffe and associates make first translation of the whole Bible into English
- 1388** John Purvey revises Wycliffe Bible

1455 Gutenberg's Latin Bible—first from press

ENGLISH VERSIONS FROM GREEK

1516 Erasmus's Greek New Testament, forerunner to the Textus Receptus used by KJV translators

1525 William Tyndale makes the first translation of the New Testament from Greek into English

1536 Tyndale strangled and burned

1537 Miles Coverdale's Bible completes Tyndale's work on the Old Testament

1538 Great Bible, assembled by John Rogers, the first English Bible authorized for public use

1560 Geneva Bible—the work of William Whittingham, a Protestant English exile in Geneva

1568 Bishop's Bible—a revision of the Great Bible

1582 Rheims New Testament published

1607-1611 King James Version, the "Authorized Version," is made

Copyright © 1994 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 43: How We Got Our Bible, Canon to King James

A Testament Is Born

Could Matthew take shorthand?—and other intriguing reasons the New Testament may have emerged surprisingly early.

Dr. Carsten Peter Thiede is director of the Institut Für Wissenschaftstheoretische Grundlagenforschung in Paderborn, Germany. He is also a member of the CHRISTIAN HISTORY advisory board.

"But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger" (John 8:6).

Here, in the story of the adulteress, we learn that Jesus knew how to write. But Jesus was a teacher, not a writer—it was left to others to write down what he said. Yet literacy was something Jesus could take for granted. The ability to write fluently and intelligibly was widespread in ancient Israel, almost as widespread as the ability to memorize long and complicated texts.

In other words, Jesus could count on this: among his followers there would be a number of people capable not only of memorizing what he said, but also of writing it down.

Furthermore, Jesus and the people around him could use more than one language. Aramaic was commonly used in daily life, Hebrew in religious life, particularly in worship and the reading of Scripture (e.g., Luke 4:16–30).

But people were aware of a third language, that of the eastern Roman Empire: Greek. Recent investigations have shown that even orthodox Jews used Greek in everyday dealings with each other—we see it, for instance, in tombstone inscriptions and in handwritten notes passed between defenders of the Masada fortress.

Jesus himself used Greek: in the dialogue with the Greek-speaking Syrian Phoenician woman (Mark 7:24–30), and in the dispute about paying taxes to Caesar (Mark 12:13–17), which relies on a wordplay that works only in Greek.

But (and this is a fairly recent insight of scholarship) the first stages of a literary tradition may have been instantaneous with Jesus' ministry—and they could have been surprisingly precise. Shorthand writing ("tachygraphy") was known in Israel and in the Greco-Roman world. We find a first trace of it in the Greek translation of Psalm 45:1 (third century B.C.): "My tongue is the pen of a skillful writer"—literally, "a stenographer."

Such a skill was highly necessary. Writing material was scarce: leather or parchment was highly priced; papyrus was dependent on import. Writers often were forced to use pot shards or wax tablets, which had limited room for detailed texts. Shorthand writing was the most practical remedy.

There was even a man among Jesus' entourage who was professionally qualified to write shorthand: Levi-Matthew, the customs official. Indeed, if Levi-Matthew had heard the Sermon on the Mount before he was called by Jesus (and could react so swiftly to this call because he had already been convinced by that sermon), one may have in Matthew 5 through 7 a direct result of a shorthand protocol.

Whatever the exact reconstruction of the earliest stages may be, we do know from the prologue to Luke's Gospel that there were more literary sources he could use than just the completed Gospels of Matthew and

Mark: "**Many have undertaken to draw up an account** of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word" (Luke 1:1–2).

In sum, though there exist theological theories about the long and slow development of the Gospels in certain ancient communities, some historical evidence suggests the first followers of Jesus may have handed down his teaching in written form.

Christian Libraries

Early Christians soon gathered such writings. They were profoundly interested in the literary world. Occasionally, they talk about it with humor: "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written" (John 21:25). Or they ask for writing material: "When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments" (2 Tim. 4:13). Or they are seen in the process of writing: "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches" (Rev. 1:11).

So well acquainted were they with a literary tradition, literature was used in symbolic ways: "The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up ..." (Rev. 6:14).

This advanced interest in writing had an obvious consequence: texts had to be collected in archives and libraries, and even in stores from which copies could be ordered and supplied. Christians from a Jewish background would have known the collected scrolls of the Torah, the Prophets, the Psalms, and so forth. Those of Greco-Roman background would have known the collections of philosophers and poets like Aratus, Cleanthes, Menander, Euripides, and others, to which Paul alludes in his letters and speeches.

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls helps us to understand how Jews and Jewish Christians organized their libraries.

There were three types of books: copies of Holy Scripture (what we now call the Old Testament), commentaries on Scripture, and theological writings.

For Christians, the first Scriptures they thrived on were the Law and the Prophets. These were copied and distributed since they provided the sources for one vital ingredient of the Christian message: the suffering and redemption of Jesus the Messiah had been predicted many centuries earlier.

Collected Letters

But how should Christians interpret these sources? How should they put them into practice? How should they integrate them into the life and teachings of Jesus?

Interpretation, first of all, was given in major speeches—like those of Peter at Pentecost, and those of Stephen and Paul—collected and edited by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles, the sequel to his Gospel.

More important, there were the letters, all of which in one way or another interpret Old Testament stories, people, and prophecies. Some of them—like Paul's letter to the Romans, the anonymous letter to the Hebrews, or the two letters of Peter and the letter of Jude—depend on a good knowledge of the Old Testament and other Jewish texts.

Early Christian letters, in fact, were the first documents distributed as collections. We find a trace of this in the New Testament itself. At the end of Peter's second letter, we read, "Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave

him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters." The statement presupposes a collection of Paul's letters, though not necessarily a complete collection.

Some recent scholarship has begun to "redate" 2 Peter to the lifetime of Peter (rather than regard it as a second-century work of one of Peter's disciples); following that dating, an initial collection of letters would have existed in the mid-sixties of the first century. That makes sense: Paul's surviving letters had all been written by then.

A few years ago, Young-Kyu Kim, a papyrologist at Göttingen University, demonstrated, I think conclusively, that p46 (an early collection of Paul's letters) should no longer be dated about a.d. 200, as it has commonly been. Instead, Kim showed, with a variety of evidence, that it should be dated to the late first century—in other words, to the lifetime of people like John and other "survivors" of the first Christian generation.

The Final Four

And the Gospels? Again, more can be said today than a few years ago. Martin Hengel of Tübingen University, one of the world's leading New Testament scholars, provided some new insights into the process of collecting the Gospels.

Look at a modern book on a library shelf—you glean the author's name from the spine. In New Testament times, there were no spines, since books existed in scrolls. No matter how these scrolls were stored, you would merely see the "top end," with a handle. In order to identify the contents, little parchment or leather strips (called *sittiboi*) were attached to the handle.

Since space was scarce, if there existed just one book on a given subject, only the title would be given. For the Gospels, as long as there was only one, the *sittibos* would have said, *Euangelion*, that is "Good News," or "Good News of Jesus Christ." But the very moment a second Gospel came into existence, differentiation became necessary; the first and the second Gospel would have carried the name of the authors—"according to Mark," "according to Matthew," and so on.

Thus, long before the end of the first century, there was—of necessity—a systematic approach to identifying the authors *and* cataloguing their works.

By the beginning of the second century, the number of the Gospels and the names of their authors were therefore well established. Our first literary source is Papias, writing at about A.D. 110. None of the later so-called gospels existed yet—neither the Gospel of Thomas, nor that of Nicodemus, of James, nor whomever. Papias knows and accepts the earliest Gospels, and he gives us some anecdotal information about their authors.

For instance, he calls Mark "stubble-fingered"—what on earth does that mean? What does he mean when he tells us that Mark was the *hermeneutes* of Peter? Interpreter? Translator? Editor? The word could mean all three.

Or what does it mean when Papias writes that Matthew compiled the *logia* (sayings) of Jesus *en hebraidi dialecto* (in Hebrew/Aramaic dialect)? In Hebrew/Aramaic style but in the Greek language? Could he have known about Levi-Matthew's shorthand notes of Jesus' public addresses (i.e., *logia*)?

The brief quotes from Papias's works leave many a question unanswered. The gist of it, however, remains: Papias of Hierapolis knew about a collection of Gospels as early as the beginning of the second century—and this implies the existence of such a collection at an even earlier stage. In other words, he appears to corroborate what we now know about Paul's letters from the redating of that papyrus codex p46.

Some seventy years later, about 180, Irenaeus offers one other item that has stimulated scholarly debate. He gives for the first time the order of the four Gospels as we have it today: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. In addition, he tells us that Mark's Gospel was written after the "exodus" of Peter and Paul.

This word has been used as a tool for dating the Gospel; for if **exodus** means "death," as the majority of critics have assumed, then a.d. 67, the probable date of Paul's and Peter's martyrdoms, would be the earliest possible date for Mark.

Exodus, however, can also mean "departure"—as in the title of the second book of the Old Testament. Does Irenaeus imply a departure of Peter and Paul from Rome some time before their eventual return and martyrdom?

Only a couple of years ago, an American scholar, E. Earle Ellis, provided an important part of the answer. He analyzed every single work of Irenaeus, and he discovered that Irenaeus never uses **exodus** when he means "death." For "death," he always employs the unequivocal Greek word **thanatos**. Thus, Mark's Gospel was probably written not after the **deaths** of Peter and Paul but after their **departure** from Rome—some time before.

Other New Testaments

Much like today, early Christians had their favorite texts, and occasionally, letters or even whole Gospels remained unused in certain regions. Second Peter, for example, was read almost exclusively in its "target area," northern Asia Minor. Clement of Rome, writing in about a.d. 96 (perhaps several decades earlier) is the first known author to have quoted from this letter. Communities elsewhere in the Roman Empire had not even heard of it, let alone read it initially. When it finally reached them, some uttered doubts about its apostolic authorship. (However, Origen, the third-century theologian and philologist, stated that Peter had proclaimed the gospel of Christ on "the twin trumpets of his two letters.")

Or take Mark's Gospel—it may, in all likelihood, have been the first full Gospel ever completed. But Matthew's longer, story-and-speech Gospel soon became more popular, and thus we know of more manuscript fragments of Matthew than of Mark.

It isn't surprising, then, that some people began collecting and arranging Christian writings in peculiar ways. A man called Marcion arrived in Rome in about A.D. 140 and developed a pseudo-Christian idea of God and Christ. That led him to exclude those early apostolic writings that highlighted the physical resurrection of Christ and the Jewish roots of Christianity. In the end, all he accepted was a severely condensed version of Luke (without the Nativity scenes and the detailed Resurrection appearances), and ten of Paul's letters. Soon enough, he and his followers were condemned as heretics, and their movement eventually petered out.

Narrowing the List

Marcion, however misguided, did force the church to consider more formally which books should make up the New Testament.

In this process, the church never gave in to the temptation to "harmonize" the documents. The four Gospels—with their different emphases, narratives, speeches—were seen not as an embarrassing multitude but as complementary, as the God-given fullness of reports by human beings with their individualities. They were never seen, as Marcion saw them, as contradictory, and therefore in need of editing.

To give another example: early Christians were perceptive enough to notice that the letter of Jude had taken over large chunks from 2 Peter (or vice-versa). But they were also intelligent enough to realize that

this provided an insight into the way letters were used and applied during the first generations.

Nor was Martin Luther the first to notice that Paul, with his emphasis on faith, appeared to see things in a different light from James, who stresses the importance of works. The early Christians preferred to see these themes as complementary. "Unity in diversity"—this may be a description of the yardstick applied to the collection that grew into our New Testament.

But where to end? How extensive should that diverse collection finally be? Which books and letters should be used in services? In particular, what about such writings as the second-century Didache, or the Letter of Barnabas, the Shepherd of Hermas, or the two letters to the Corinthians once attributed to Clement of Rome?

Eusebius of Caesarea, writing at the beginning of the fourth century, surveyed the state of things. He pretty much confirmed the contents of a fragmentary list from about a.d. 200, a list called "Canon Muratori." Eusebius says that some texts are still under debate in some churches—the letters of James and Jude, the second letter of Peter, the second and third letters of John, and Revelation. Though he does not share such doubts himself, he is adamant that the Shepherd of Hermas, the Apocalypse of Peter, the Acts of Paul, the Letter of Barnabas and the Didache are "not genuine," that is, not of truly apostolic origin.

A few decades after Eusebius, the **Codex Vaticanus**, a Greek volume of both Old and New Testaments, contained the complete New Testament as we have it today; but only slightly later, **Codex Sinaiticus** still included the Letter of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas. Later still, toward the end of the fourth century, the **Codex Alexandrinus** excluded the Shepherd and Barnabas, but had the two letters of Clement instead.

In other words, even major, official codices, expensive to make and therefore produced with at least regional authority, continued to show a certain degree of freedom of choice beyond the agreed core of the 27 writings. It was an individual who finally helped clarify things.

Unshakable Consensus

In 367, Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, used the opportunity of his annual Easter Festal Letter (a letter to all the churches and monasteries under his jurisdiction) to explain what the Old Testament and New Testament should consist of. In terms of the New Testament, he listed the same 27 texts we have today, and he wrote, "These are the 'springs of salvation,' so that anyone who is thirsty may be satisfied with the messages contained in them. Only in them is the teaching of true religion proclaimed as the 'Good News.' Let no one add to these or take anything away from them."

Athanasius then says that the Shepherd of Hermas and the Teaching of the Apostles (the Didache) are "indeed not included in the canon." He does say, however, that they are helpful reading for new converts.

Athanasius's list did not settle the matter everywhere. In the West, variations remained possible, and as we have seen, a codex like Alexandrinus could, decades after the Festal Letter, happily include two letters the bishop did not even mention. But by the early 400s, the consensus of tradition was more or less established.

In a letter in 414, Jerome appears to accept the New Testament books listed by Athanasius—a list that corresponds to today's New Testament. But Jerome thinks the Letter of Barnabas should also be included, since the author was the companion of Paul and an apostle. But, and this is important, while agreeing to differ, Jerome accepted what had come to be the consensus. In other words, Jerome confirms that by the beginning of the fifth century, the canon of the New Testament had achieved a kind of solemn, unshakable status; it could not be altered, even if one had different opinions.

Since Jerome's time, the canon of our New Testament has been approved by history, tradition, and worship. In spite of some scholarly attempts to exclude or add some books, these 27 books have remained a non-negotiable nucleus of Christianity worldwide.

Copyright © 1994 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 43: How We Got Our Bible, Canon to King James

What Writings Must Christians Obey?

Four definitions of the New Testament

Marcion (c. 140)	The Canon Muratori (c. 200) (Matthew) (Mark)	Eusebius (c. 325) Matthew Mark Luke John Acts Romans 1 Corinthians 2 Corinthians Galatians Ephesians(1) Philippians Colossians 1 Thessalonians 2 Thessalonians Philemon	Athanasius (367) Matthew Mark Luke John Acts Romans 1 Corinthians 2 Corinthians Galatians Ephesians Philippians Colossians 1 Thessalonians 2 Thessalonians 1 Timothy 2 Timothy Titus 1 Peter 1 John 2 John Jude Revelation of John Wisdom of Solomon Revelation of Peter
Luke	Luke(2) John Acts		
Romans	Romans	Romans	Romans
1 Corinthians	1 Corinthians	1 Corinthians	1 Corinthians
2 Corinthians	2 Corinthians	2 Corinthians	2 Corinthians
Galatians	Galatians	Galatians	Galatians
Ephesians(1)	Ephesians	Ephesians	Ephesians
Philippians	Philippians	Philippians	Philippians
Colossians	Colossians	Colossians	Colossians
1 Thessalonians	1 Thessalonians	1 Thessalonians	1 Thessalonians
2 Thessalonians	2 Thessalonians 1 Timothy 2 Timothy Titus	2 Thessalonians 1 Timothy 2 Timothy Titus	2 Thessalonians 1 Timothy 2 Timothy Titus
Philemon			Philemon Hebrews James 1 Peter 2 Peter 1 John 2 John 3 John Jude Revelation of John
	1 John 2 John	1 John	
	Jude	Revelation of John(3)	
	Revelation of John Wisdom of Solomon Revelation of Peter		Revelation of John

The order of each list has been arranged according to Athanasius' canon.

1. Marcion calls this book "Laodiceans."

2. In this list, the first two Gospels are missing, but Luke, the first listed, is announced as the "third" gospel.

3. Eusebius says Revelation was still disputed in his time.

Copyright © 1994 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 43: How We Got Our Bible, Canon to King James

Books That Almost Made It

Excerpt from a popular writing that some wanted to include in the New Testament: *The Shepherd of Hermas*

In this picturesque allegory, a shepherd (Jesus) gives strict moral guidance through visions, "mandates," and "similitudes" to a man named "Hermas." The former slave-turned-businessman wrote it between 90 and 157 in Rome. It was used as a textbook for new believers and was considered Scripture by Irenaeus (c. 130–c. 200) and Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–c. 215).

The Gift of Repentance

I asked [the shepherd], "Because my sins are abundant, what must I do to live?"

"You shall live," he said, "if you keep my commandments and walk in them. Whosoever shall hear and keep these commandments shall live before God."

"I must continue to question," I said. "Some teachers say that there is no second repentance beyond what was granted when we were blessed in the water of baptism and received remission for our previous sins."

He replied, "That is so; for he who has received remission for former sins ought never to sin again but live in purity. Since you never cease asking about such things, I will explain more without excusing those who already believe in the Lord.

"Those who believe now, and those who shall believe in the future, need no repentance of sins, since they have remission of their former sin.

"For those who were called before these days the Lord granted repentance. The Lord knows the heart, and knowing all things beforehand, he knows the weakness of man and the wiles of the Devil, who throws mischief at the doors of God's servants. Because the Lord is merciful, he granted mercy to his creation and offered repentance.

"But after the Lord established this holy gift, and a man be tempted by the Devil, he has but one repentance. It is unprofitable, therefore, for such a man to sin and repent repeatedly, for scarcely shall he live."

I said, "When I heard this truth, I attained life, for I know that if I do not add again to my sins I shall be saved."

"You will be saved," he answered, "and so shall all who accept God's gift."

Angel of Righteousness

"Understand," said he, "that two angels accompany man, one of righteousness and one of wickedness."

"How then," said I, "shall I know their working since both angels dwell with me?"

"Listen," he replied, "and do not wander. The angel of righteousness is delicate, modest, meek, and gentle. When he enters your heart, he speaks to you of purity, reverence, self-control, and virtue. When these things come into your heart and good deeds flow from them, you know that the angel of righteousness is within you.

"Now observe the works of the angel of wickedness: he is ill-tempered, bitter, and foolish, and his evil deeds cast down the servants of God."

Then I said, "I do not know how to detect him."

"You wander again," he replied. "Listen: when ill temper and bitterness come over you, then you know that he is in you. When the lust for renown, feasting on heavy luxuries, a desire of women, covetousness, haughtiness, and similar urges come into your heart, know that the angel of wickedness has slid into you. When you feel this, shake him out and cast him off. His deeds are unprofitable for those who would live to God."

"You now have the workings of both angels to think upon. Believe the angel of righteousness and resist the angel of wickedness. His teaching brings great evil even to small things... This commandment opens the ways of faith to grant you to believe with your whole heart in the works of righteousness, and by doing them, live to God."

Copyright © 1994 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 43: How We Got Our Bible, Canon to King James

How We Got our Old Testament

The process was long and complex, and the result is still a matter of dispute.

Dr. Bruce Waltke is professor of Old Testament at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia. His most recent book is a commentary on Micah (Baker, 1993).

In the late 100s, Bishop Melito of Sardis (in modern Turkey) was pressed by a friend to obtain “an accurate statement of the ancient books as regards their number and their order.” Melito did, and as a result, gave a now-famous list of the Old Testament books. Except for its lack of Esther, this list matches today’s Jewish and Protestant Old Testament.

But how was this Old Testament canon—the recognized, authoritative writings—formed?

Four Stages

According to the legend of 2 Esdras 14:37–47 (written about a.d. 100), God commanded Ezra to drink a potent cup. “Thereupon, my heart poured forth understanding. And the Most High gave understanding to the five men [with me], and by turns they wrote what was dictated, in characters they did not know. ... ” After forty days were up, God told Ezra to make these now sacred books public.

On firmer history, however, professors LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush (of Fuller Theological Seminary) distinguish four stages in the development of the Old Testament canon, slightly modified here:

1. Speeches and sayings. God wrote the Ten Commandments in stone (Deut. 5:22). Moses put the Book of the Covenant, including the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:1 through 23:33), into writing, and the people agreed to obey it (24:3–8). Other books began as speeches or sayings that were recognized by people as authoritative. For example, the oracle preserved in Micah 3:9–12 originally had caused King Hezekiah to repent (Jer. 26:17–19). Most of the books of the Old Testament are anthologies of authoritative utterances.

2. Individual books. The Book of the Covenant became part of the Book of Exodus and immediately was accepted as the Word of God through Moses. Regarding Deuteronomy, Moses commanded, “Take this Book of the Law and place it beside the ark of the covenant. ... There it will remain as a witness against you” (Deut. 31:24–26).

This book was later transferred to Solomon’s temple and endured decades of neglect. In 625 b.c., those repairing the temple rediscovered it; after hearing it read, King Josiah and all the people repented (2 Kings 22–23).

Sometimes books were later expanded by new utterances or writing—the obituary of Moses was certainly added to Deuteronomy, for instance.

Because of these additions, some books have come down to us in two forms. There is, for instance, both a short form of Jeremiah, preserved in the Greek translation, the **Septuagint**, and a long form, preserved in the received Hebrew text. There are also two editions of Ezekiel, Proverbs, and portions of other Old Testament books. (English Bibles, though, follow the Hebrew text.)

3. Collection of books. The five books of Moses—the “Book of the Law”—were probably edited right through the time of Ezra–Nehemiah (ca. 400 b.c.). During the exile (587–539 b.c.), Deuteronomy through 2 Kings (less Ruth) were added.

Daniel 9:2 cites Jeremiah as “in the books,” meaning the collection of sacred writings later called “The Prophets,” not those writings contained in the Law (Genesis through Deuteronomy).

Psalms consists of five books of collected psalms. Books I (Psalms 1–41) and II (42–72) represent an early collection and conclude, “The prayers of David son of Jesse are ended.” During the Exile, Book III (73–89) was added. After the Exile, the last section of the Psalter was added and divided into two books, IV (90–106) and V (107–150)—almost certainly to resemble the five books of Moses.

4. A fixed canon. After the Antiochene persecution (about 164 b.c.), probably Judas Maccabeus and his associates fixed the canonical books into three divisions: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. Jesus refers to this division in Luke 24:44.

After the canon was fixed, some rabbis wondered about the canonicity of certain books: Ezekiel, because his temple contradicted the one described in the Pentateuch; Proverbs, because 26:4 and 5 contradict one another; Ecclesiastes, because it seems unorthodox; Song of Solomon and Esther, because they omit the name of God (unless it is concealed in Song 8:6). Still, each found a defender.

This, then, is the canon the Christian church was born with. Jesus and his apostles assumed it.

Today's Old Testaments

Early church fathers, however, began quoting other Jewish books as canonical. Polycarp, for instance, in about a.d. 135, quotes Tobit as Scripture. This happened because many of the fathers relied on the Greek **Septuagint** translation of the Old Testament which contained a number of extra books. These extra books continued to be debated through the Middle Ages.

Since the Reformation, Protestants have considered these books “apocrypha,” as having no sacred authority. Roman Catholics call them “deutero-canonical,” meaning they were added to the canon after the other books—officially at the Council of Trent (1546).

In today's English Bibles, the Old Testament is arranged in four sections: law, history, lyrical books and wisdom books, and the prophets. This standard Christian arrangement goes back, via the Latin Bible, to the Greek Septuagint and was the arrangement used by Melito.

Copyright © 1994 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 43: How We Got Our Bible, Canon to King James

More Than One Bible

Christians still disagree over the content of the Old Testament.

The Protestant Old Testament is identical to the Hebrew Bible, though the books are arranged and divided differently.

Roman Catholics since 1546 (the Council of Trent) have officially included the "deutero-canonical" or "apocryphal" books. These books were included in early editions of the King James Bible, but Protestants have not considered them authoritative because they are not found in the Hebrew Bible.

Hebrew Bible

24 books

The Law

Genesis
Exodus
Leviticus
Numbers
Deuteronomy

The Prophets

Joshua
Judges
Samuel
Kings
Isaiah
Jeremiah
Ezekiel
Minor Prophets

The Writings

Psalms
Proverbs
Job
Song of Solomon
Ruth
Lamentations
Ecclesiastes
Esther
Daniel
Ezra-Nehemiah
Chronicles

Protestant Bible

39 books

Law

Genesis
Exodus
Leviticus
Numbers
Deuteronomy

History

Joshua
Judges
Ruth
I & II Samuel
I & II Kings
I & II Chronicles
Ezra
Nehemiah
Esther

Poetry and Wisdom

Job
Psalms
Proverbs
Ecclesiastes
Song of Solomon

Prophecy

Isaiah
Jeremiah
Lamentations
Ezekiel
Daniel
The 12 Minor Prophets

Roman Catholic Bible

46 books

(The Protestant List, plus:)

Tobit
Judith
Wisdom of Solomon
Ecclesiasticus (Sirach)
Baruch (includes the Letter of Jeremiah)
I & II Maccabees

Additions to Daniel:

Song of the Three Young Men
Susanna
Bel and the Dragon

Additions to Esther

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 43: How We Got Our Bible, Canon to King James

Discovering the Oldest New Testaments

The bizarre stories behind the great Greek manuscripts.

H. G. G. Herklots was a professor of exegetical theology at St. John's College in Canada and a rector in Flaxton, Manchester, in England. He wrote *How Our Bible Came to Us* (Oxford/A&C Black), from which this article is adapted.

There have been many crises in the history of Christianity. Few have been greater than that initiated by the emperor Diocletian on February 23, 303. This last great persecution by the Roman Empire was slow in coming, and it was some time before its full seriousness was felt. Then it had become violent.

The main enemy the state had to face was neither the Christian buildings nor even the Christians themselves but the books they possessed. If these were not destroyed, they might be like buried seeds and put forth new life later on. Thus, many copies of the Scriptures were destroyed.

When the persecution died down and discipline was restored to the church, the most important moral problem was what should be done about the *tradidores*, those who had "handed over" sacred books for destruction. (Biblical studies are poorer in the material at their disposal because of the persecution of Diocletian.) But not all Christians were tradidores. Copies of the Scriptures were buried and hidden and then brought out again.

This was the last great persecution. Its failure led to the victory of the church. In 306 Constantine—later known to history as the first Christian emperor—was hailed as Augustus by his troops at York. In 312 he was greeted with the same title by the Senate in Rome. In 313 there was issued the Edict of Milan proclaiming freedom of worship. In 324 Constantine became sole emperor.

The victory of the church was complete. Christianity now was not merely a tolerated religion but one that had special official approval. It became fashionable to join the church. There was, naturally, need for many more church buildings. There was also need for many more Bibles.

Fifty Bibles for the Emperor

The center of gravity in the Empire was no longer at Rome but much further east in Byzantium. Constantine rebuilt it as a new Rome, and for the churches of the new "Constantinople," the emperor himself, in a.d. 332, ordered fifty vellum Bibles from Eusebius of Caesarea:

"I have thought it expedient to instruct your Intelligence that you should command to be written fifty volumes on prepared vellum, easy to read and conveniently portable, by professional scribes with an exact understanding of their craft—volumes, that is to say, of the Holy Scriptures, the provision and use of which is, as you are aware, most necessary for the instruction of the church."

"Letters have been dispatched from our Clemency to the accountant of the province, advising him to supply everything requisite for the production of the books, and it will be your care to ensure that they are prepared as quickly as possible."

"Using the authority of this letter you should commandeer two public carriages for their transport, for by such means will these fine volumes be most readily brought before our eyes,

this duty being performed by one of the deacons of your church, who on reaching our presence will experience our liberality."

It would be exciting if we could claim that in some museum there was one of the actual Bibles ordered by Constantine for the churches in his new capital. No such claim can be made. What we can say, however, is that books of this character and date do exist. They are our primary authority for the text of the Greek Bible.

Other cities emulated Constantinople in endeavoring to secure the best copies money could buy. In earlier days, a church that possessed the Scriptures would own them in parts. The New Testament would be in one section for the Gospels, a second section for the epistles of Saint Paul. A third section headed Acts would also contain, very likely, the other New Testament epistles, or some of them. And there might be a fourth section containing the Revelation. But now whole Bibles were made, to become not only a means of instruction but a source of ecclesiastical and civic pride.

The First Full Bibles

Three imposing volumes have survived—none of them complete—from this period, the **Codex Vaticanus**, the **Codex Sinaiticus**, and the **Codex Alexandrinus**. The first, as its name implies, is in the Library of the Vatican, where it has been at least since 1481. **Codex Sinaiticus** is in the British Museum. It was bought in 1933 from the Soviet Government. The **Codex Alexandrinus** is also in the British Museum. It reached England in 1627.

These great manuscripts are called “uncials,” because they were written in capital letters throughout. (When a running hand was later adopted, the resulting manuscripts are called “cursives” or “minuscules.”)

In uncial writing, no break was made between the words, and there were a number of contractions. It is as if the opening verse of St. Mark’s Gospel were written out somewhat as follows:

thbeginningothgospelojesusxthsonogod

There was practically no punctuation, and there was no verse numbering nor chapter divisions. The book itself was a large one kept in church. When cursive writing became common, the more difficult uncial manuscripts became neglected.

Vatican Hassles

Of these great vellum codices, **Vaticanus** is probably the earliest. It undoubtedly comes from the fourth century. In their edition of the Greek New Testament, the English scholars Westcott and Hort gave special importance to **Vaticanus** and **Sinaiticus**, so that it has come to have a notable influence upon our Revised Version.

As the late Sir Frederic Kenyon pointed out, there is a lively story of the endeavors of scholars to overcome the obstacles the Vatican Library for so long put in the way of **Vaticanus’s** being studied:

“A correspondent of Erasmus in 1533 sent that scholar a number of selected readings from it. In 1669 a collation (or statement of its various readings) was made by Bartolocci, but it was never published and remained unknown until 1819. Other imperfect collations were made about 1720 and 1780.

“Napoleon carried the manuscript off as a prize of victory to Paris, where it remained until

1815. ... While at Paris it was studied by Hug, and its great age and supreme importance were first fully made known ... but after its return to Rome a period of seclusion set in. In 1843 [German scholar Constantin] Tischendorf, after waiting for several months, was allowed to see it for six hours. Next year De Muralt was permitted to study it for nine hours. In 1845 the great English scholar Tregelles was allowed indeed to see it but not to copy a word."

The indefatigable Tischendorf kept at it, though he broke the rules by copying twenty pages instead of merely collating difficult passages; his access was consequently restricted. However, the result of his visits on only fourteen days, lasting only three hours each, enabled him to produce in 1867 the most accurate edition that had yet appeared.

Bible in the Garbage

The history of **Codex Sinaiticus** is an exciting one. In May 1844, Tischendorf was traveling in search of manuscripts and arrived at the lonely monastery of Saint Catherine, walled like a Norman castle, on the side of Mount Sinai. Here a large wastepaper basket caught his eye.

The monk in charge of the library said that it contained old rubbish that would shortly be burned: two basketsful had already been destroyed in this way. Tischendorf asked to see what it contained and was amazed to find 129 leaves from what seemed to be the oldest Bible he had ever seen. It was from the Old Testament in Greek. Could he have this rubbish?

Unfortunately Tischendorf does not appear to have possessed the advantage of what is called a 'poker face.' The monks could tell he was excited by his find. They let him have a third only. (Later Tischendorf presented these 43 leaves to Frederick Augustus II of Saxony.) Tischendorf published his find, correctly attributing it to the middle of the fourth century. But he did not say where he had found it. He did not want any scholars to get to Sinai before him.

Tischendorf was a poor man, who did not easily find means for travel. Also there were other claims of scholarship. In 1853 he was able to travel to the East again. This time the monks of Sinai proved unhelpful. All he got hold of was a fragment containing a few verses of Genesis.

In 1859 he was back again. This time he was cautious. He talked about anything and everything except biblical manuscripts. On the last night, he mentioned them casually in a conversation with the monastery steward: "The latter, anxious to display his own learning, remarked, 'And I, too, have a Septuagint,' that is, the Greek Old Testament; and so saying he took down from a shelf over the door of his cell a bulky parcel wrapped in a red cloth, which he untied, revealing to Tischendorf's astonished gaze, not merely the leaves he had rescued from the flames fifteen years before, but other parts of the Old Testament, and the New Testament complete, with two early Christian works, the Epistle of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas.

"Tischendorf casually asked, and readily obtained, permission to borrow the volume for the night, and alone in his cell, he set to work to copy the Epistle of Barnabas, the original Greek text of which had been known only in very imperfect copies."* [* Quote about Tischendorf's discovery is from **The Codex Sinaiticus & The Codex Alexandrinus** (London, British Museum, 1951), p. 6, quoted by Herklotz.]

Tischendorf persuaded the monks to send the manuscript to Cairo, where there was a branch of the monastery. There he spent two months in copying it. But this was not really satisfactory. How could he persuade them to give it up? At last the idea occurred to him to persuade them to present it to the tsar of Russia, who was patron of his travels and also the traditional protector of the Eastern Orthodox churches.

The project attracted the monks. The archbishopric of Sinai had fallen vacant. It would be useful to gain the tsar's support for their nominee for the post. It was natural to expect that if they presented this volume to the tsar they would, like the deacons who transported the loads of Bibles to Constantine in the fourth century, experience the emperor's liberality. The negotiations were long and involved.

In 1862 Tischendorf published a version of the codex in facsimile type; but it was not until 1867 that the codex was presented to the tsar and placed in the Imperial Public Library at St. Petersburg. In return, the monks of St. Catherine received 9,000 roubles and a number of Russian decorations. Their nominee had also secured the coveted archbishopric. The monks of the period were satisfied with the bargain and remained friendly to Tischendorf; some of their successors have resented it and sought to traduce his memory.

Tip of the Iceberg

We have had opportunity to deal only with some of the most famous uncial manuscripts. There are many more, the pride of libraries in the old world and in the new. When one considers the treatment books have suffered from, the hazards they have had to face, the marvel is not that so few manuscripts exist as that there are so many.

Copyright © 1994 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 43: How We Got Our Bible, Canon to King James

The Look and Feel of the First Bibles

H. G. G. Herklots was a professor of exegetical theology at St. John's College in Canada and a rector in Flaxton, Manchester, in England. He wrote *How Our Bible Came to Us* (Oxford/A&C Black), from which this article is adapted.

A large volume of the kind ordered by Constantine is called a codex. The word is used to describe a manuscript that in shape and appearance is like a modern book—though very much larger than most. (A leaf of the ***Codex Sinaiticus*** measures 15 inches in height by 13 1/2 in breadth.) In the early fourth century, the codex form finally won the victory over the earlier roll, and vellum won its victory over the earlier papyrus (made from the pith of a Nile valley reed, much more like modern paper).

Vellum—or parchment—is made from the skin of sheep or goats. (Both animals sometimes make their contribution to one volume.) ***Vaticanus*** is made from particularly fine parchment, said to have been prepared from antelope skins.

Though both sides of a sheet of vellum are written upon, the outer “hair side,” by reason of its roughness, presents greater difficulty to the scribe than the smoother “flesh side.” A method of book construction was evolved so that pages opened flesh-side to flesh-side and hair-side to hair-side throughout.

Very careful measurements were made to ensure a neat appearance of the page and an economical use of the costly materials employed. Lines were ruled and pricks made through the folded sheets of vellum (on the parts where writing would later make these marks almost invisible) to guide the scribe.

In ***Codex Sinaiticus***, for example, each page was ruled with four narrow columns usually containing forty-eight lines apiece. In the poetic books of the Old Testament, however, the writing was in two columns and indented lines emphasized the verse structure. The use of a similar scheme in the Revised Version, whereby verse is easily distinguishable from prose, was thus a return to an early practice.

Vaticanus originally contained the whole Greek Bible; but of the approximately 820 original leaves only 759 remain. Originally Codex Sinaiticus must have contained about 730 leaves. Only 390 exist today.

Copyright © 1994 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 43: How We Got Our Bible, Canon to King James

How We Got Our Bible: Christian History Interview - From the Apostles To You

We have about 5,000 Greek manuscripts that contain at least a portion of the New Testament, but in many places, they do not agree exactly on wording. And most of the earliest copies are 100 to 200 years later than the originals. From a historical perspective, how accurately does the modern Bible reflect the content of the original manuscripts?

To answer this question, Christian History **talked with Bruce Metzger, professor emeritus of Princeton Theological Seminary. Dr. Metzger has had a distinguished career in biblical studies. His most important work was heading the translation committee for the New Revised Standard Version (1990).**

Christian History: For most of its long history, the Bible was copied by hand. How easy was it for a mistake to enter into this process?

Bruce Metzger: Whenever something is copied by hand, frailties of human eyesight enter in, particularly if that document is old and some ink has faded. Copying is also long, tedious work. It would take a scribe several months to copy just one Gospel. In some secular Greek manuscripts, scribes left a note at the end that indicates the patient labor involved: "As the traveler rejoices to see the home country, so the scribe rejoices to see the end of a manuscript!"

The invention of eyeglasses around 1375 certainly helped reduce the number of mistakes. And the invention of printing with movable type in 1456 assured production of duplicate copies. But prior to that, for over a thousand years, everything was done by hand, and the more times an ancient text was copied, the more chance for errors to creep in.

How reliable are the Greek and Hebrew manuscripts we have today?

The earlier copies are generally closer to the wording of the originals. The translators of the 1611 King James Bible, for instance, used Greek and Hebrew manuscripts from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Today Bible translators have access to Greek manuscripts from the third and fourth centuries and Hebrew manuscripts from the era of Jesus.

We even have the Rylands Papyrus, just a torn page with a few verses from John 18, that we can date between a.d. 100 and 150. So today we have access to a text of the Old and New Testaments that is more basic, more fundamental, less open to charges of scribal error or change.

How can we date such manuscripts accurately?

Since manuscripts rarely have dates on them, we must judge the date by the handwriting. Handwriting styles differ with the times. So we compare the handwriting of a manuscript with that of deeds and bills of sale and other documents that do include dates. In addition, sometimes a scribal note in the margin or on the dedication page gives away the period in which the manuscript was copied.

Most of the earliest surviving New Testament manuscripts are 100 to 200 years later than the originals. Is that cause for concern?

By contrast, our copies of other ancient writings, like those of Virgil or Homer, are often **many** hundreds of years later than their originals.

In some of those writings, we have only one copy! The New Testament, on the other hand, has many copies.

Over the centuries of transmission, have scribal errors touched any core Christian doctrines?

No key doctrine of the Christian faith has been invalidated by textual uncertainty.

On the other hand, some passages have been affected. For example, take Mark 9:29. Jesus is explaining how he was able to cast out a demon, and in the earliest manuscripts, he is quoted as saying, "This kind can come out only by prayer." In the Greek manuscripts the KJV translators used, the two words **and fasting** are tacked on. I do not think that is an earth-shaking difference, but it is typical of the kind of changes we are talking about.

How would such a change have taken place?

By studying manuscript history, we see that the words **and fasting** were inserted between 300 and 600. These were the years of the desert fathers and the birth of monasticism. The number of official fast days was increasing, and the regimens of fasting were becoming more strict. Probably a devout scribe, himself part of a fasting tradition, believed that Jesus must have meant to include "and fasting," so he included the two words.

Some Bibles list three endings for the Gospel of Mark. How should we understand these?

The earliest Greek, Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, and Latin manuscripts end the Gospel of Mark at 16:8: "The women said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." That does not sound like an appropriate ending for a book of good news, so some early scribes, undertaking their own research, added what they thought would be appropriate endings.

A few later manuscripts add just two or three verses to this abrupt ending, but most contain a longer ending, what we now number as verses 9 to 20. We can tell by examining the vocabulary that these endings were not written by Mark. So translators often put them in brackets or as a long footnote.

Why not just keep them out of the Bible?

Many translators, including myself, consider verses 9 through 20 to be a legitimate part of the New Testament.

In the third and fourth centuries, when church fathers were deciding which books should be included in the New Testament, these verses were already in the copies of Mark that most of them were using. In other words, the early church considered verses 9 through 20 to be a credible account of the Resurrection.

Though these verses were not written by Mark, I believe we have here a fifth evangelical witness to the resurrection of Jesus.

You mentioned Coptic, Armenian, and Latin manuscripts—It sounds as though the Bible was being rapidly translated from the beginning.

Not really. By the year 600, the Gospels had been translated into only eight languages. By the time of the Reformation, there were Bibles or portions of it translated into only 33 languages—out of a total of about 6,000 languages! It is discouraging to see how slow the church was in providing translations of the Holy Scriptures.

When did that change?

Not until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with the expansion of the Protestant missionary movement. According to the American Bible Society, at the end of 1993, the entire Bible has been translated into 329 languages, and at least one book of it has been translated into 2,009 languages. That means, of course, that a good many languages still lack even one book of the Bible.

On the other hand, since 85 percent of the world speaks one of these 2,009 languages, the vast majority of people have access to at least one book. The Wycliffe Bible Translators and others have done wonderful work in reducing many languages to written form and then translating the Bible into them.

In terms of the English Bible, it seems that the last few decades have been extraordinary years of translation.

Between 1952, when the Revised Standard Version came out, and 1990, when the New RSV came out, there were 27 complete translations of the Bible in English published, plus another 25 New Testament translations—all within 38 years. That is unprecedented in the history of translation.

Part of this activity is related to manuscript discoveries; when we discover still more ancient biblical manuscripts or ancient secular

manuscripts that shed light on ancient languages, people naturally want that information reflected in their Bibles.

Also, many different religious groups—Roman Catholics, moderate and conservative Protestants, and Jews—have each wanted their own translations.

In addition, there is the economic factor: the Bible is a best-seller, so many publishing companies have been inclined to sponsor and publish new versions.

With so many Bible translations available, are English-speaking people more biblically literate than in the past?

I am not sure. In the first 1,500 years of the church's history, literacy was low, and there were not many copies of the Scriptures available to read. Of the 5,000 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament now available, only 59 have all 27 books. That means that few congregations, and far fewer individuals, had access to all of the New Testament, let alone the whole Bible.

Today we live in a culture of relatively high literacy, but we also have many, many newspapers, magazines, and books to read. In addition, radio, television, and the movies are a major distraction from reading. In some ways, then, people who can read probably are not as familiar with the Bible as those who could read in previous eras.

You've spent the bulk of your 80 years immersed in this one Book. What has kept you energized?

The very fact that the Bible is inspired to be Holy Scripture. I read it, and I am inspired by the inspired words of the writers. I also find it interesting as literature. It is productive for life, for the church, for the individual believer. I thank God that I am still able to study its passages. As long as I am able, I want to follow the motto that is found in a 1734 edition of the Greek New Testament: "Apply yourself totally to the text; apply the text totally to yourself."

Copyright © 1994 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 43: How We Got Our Bible, Canon to King James

How We Got Our Bible: Recommended Resources

Let the reader be warned: with few exceptions, the history of the Bible is mostly the study of documents and so makes for daunting reading. Still, the patient reader will be rewarded.

The standard work in the field is the three-volume *Cambridge History of the Bible*, edited by S.L. Greenslade, et al., (Cambridge, 1963–1970)—a comprehensive collection of essays, covering topics broad (*The Bible in the Reformation*) and narrow (*Theodore of Mopsuestia as Representative of the Antiochene School*).

F. F. Bruce's *The Books and the Parchments: Some Chapters on the Transmission of the Bible, 3rd ed.* (Revell, 1963) is detailed, one-volume treatment. A captivating survey is H. G. G. Herklots's *How Our Bible Came to Us* (Oxford, 1954), and Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan have edited a handy one-volume reference, *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* (Oxford, 1993).

Canon

Brave souls who venture into the complex world of canon studies will be well served by three guides. Hans van Campenhausen's *The Formation of the Christian Bible* (Fortress, 1972) covers both Old and New Testaments in comprehensive fashion. Bruce M. Metzger, in *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford, 1989) and Roger T. Beckwith, in *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church* (Eerdmans, 1985) do the same for their respective topics.

English Bible

Narrowing the focus to the English Bible, there is no better place to begin than F.F. Bruce's *The English Bible: A History of Translations from the Earliest English Versions to the New English Bible*, rev. ed. (Oxford, 1970)—a readable overview of both personalities and Bible versions.

Gustavus Paine, for many years a newspaper editor, put journalistic skills to use in an engaging narrative about the people and politics behind the KJV in *The Learned Men* (Thomas Crowell, 1959).

For those who want to focus on the Bible after the KJV, two books will help. Jack P. Lewis's *The English Bible from KJV to NIV: A History and Evaluation* (Baker, 1982) delivers what it promises, and Sakae Kubo and Walter Sprecht in *So Many Versions? Twentieth-Century English Versions of the Bible* (Zondervan, 1983) sort out the distinctions among the modern versions.

Mark Galli

Copyright © 1994 by the author or Christianity Today International/Christian History magazine.