

THE
ORIGIN
OF THE
BIBLE

EDITED BY
PHILIP WESLEY COMFORT



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The Origin of the Bible

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CONTRIBUTORS

Harold O. J. Brown, Ph.D.

former Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology
The Forman Professor of Ethics in Theology
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

R. T. Beckwith, M.A.

former Director, Latimer Trust, Oxford

F. F. Bruce, M.A.

former Rylands Professor of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis
University of Manchester, England

Philip W. Comfort, Ph.D.

Senior Editor, Bible Department, Tyndale House Publishers
Visiting Professor, New Testament, Coastal Carolina University

Raymond L. Elliott, M.A. (Theology), M.A. (Linguistics)
Member Emeritus of Wycliffe Bible Translators/Summer Institute of
Linguistics—translated the New Testament into Nebaj Ixil

Milton C. Fisher, Th.M., Ph.D., D.D.

former Professor of Old Testament
Reformed Episcopal Theological Seminary

R. K. Harrison, Ph.D., D.D.

former Professor, Wycliffe College
University of Toronto

Carl F. H. Henry, Th.D., Ph.D.

former Visiting Professor
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

Mark R. Norton, M.A.

Editorial Director, Bible Department, Tyndale House Publishers

J. I. Packer, M.A., D.Phil., D.D.

Professor of Systematic Theology
Regent College

Leland Ryken, Ph.D.

Professor of English

Wheaton College

Larry Walker, Ph.D.

former Professor of Old Testament and Semitic Languages

Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary

Victor Walter, M.A., Th.M.

former Chairperson of Practical Theology

Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

former Pastor, Cheyenne Evangelical Free Church

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INTRODUCTION

THE BIBLE. No other book has had so many books written about it—so why yet another one? Though there are many books that help readers understand the content of the Bible, few explain its origins. This volume provides an overview of how the Bible was first inspired, canonized, read as sacred literature, copied in ancient Hebrew and Greek manuscripts, and translated into the languages of the world.

The first section, “The Authority and Inspiration of the Bible,” focuses on the Bible’s divine inspiration, lasting authority, and infallibility. The second section, “The Canon of the Bible,” reveals the processes that went into selecting the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament and the twenty-seven books of the New Testament to be part of canonized Scripture. This section also has an essay on the Old Testament and New Testament apocrypha. The third section, “The Bible as a Literary Text,” elucidates the literary background of the Bible and shows how the Bible is a literary masterpiece. The fourth section, “Bible Texts and Manuscripts,” describes the ancient biblical manuscripts that have been discovered and used in forming editions of the Hebrew and Greek texts. The fifth section, “Bible Translation,” provides information about the biblical languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek) and Bible translation itself. Furthermore, this section gives a brief history of the English Bible and of other versions in many languages.

I hope this book will inspire fresh appreciation for our Bible and greater understanding of the processes that went into making the Bible the inspired text that it is.

Philip W. Comfort

SECTION
ONE

THE
AUTHORITY
AND
INSPIRATION
OF THE
BIBLE

THE BIBLE

F. F. Bruce

The word “Bible” is derived through Latin from the Greek word *biblia* (books), specifically the books that are acknowledged as canonical by the Christian church. The earliest Christian use of *ta biblia* (the books) in this sense is said to be 2 Clement 2:14 (c. A.D. 150): “the books and the apostles declare that the church . . . has existed from the beginning.” (Compare Dan. 9:2, “I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures,” where the reference is to the corpus of Old Testament prophetic writings.) Greek *biblion* (of which *biblia* is the plural) is a diminutive of *biblos*, which in practice denotes any kind of written document, but originally one written on papyrus.

A term synonymous with “the Bible” is “the writings” or “the Scriptures” (Greek *hai graphai, ta grammata*), frequently used in the New Testament to denote the Old Testament documents in whole or in part. For example, Matthew 21:42 says, “Have you never read in the Scriptures?” (*en tais graphais*). The parallel passage, Mark 12:10, has the singular, referring to the particular text quoted, “Haven’t you read this Scripture?” (*ten graphen tauten*). 2 Timothy 3:15 (RSV) speaks of “the sacred writings” (*tahiera grammata*), and the next verse says, “All Scripture is God-breathed” (*pasa graphe theopneustos*). In 2 Peter 3:16 “all” the letters of Paul are included along with “the other Scriptures” (*tas loipas*

graphas), by which the Old Testament writings and probably also the Gospels are meant.

CONTENT AND AUTHORITY _____

Among Christians, for whom the Old Testament and New Testament together constitute the Bible, there is not complete agreement on their content. Some branches of the Syriac church do not include 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation in the New Testament. The Roman and Greek communions include a number of books in the Old Testament in addition to those that make up the Hebrew Bible; these additional books formed part of the Christian Septuagint.

While they are included, along with one or two others, in the complete Protestant English Bible, the Church of England (like the Lutheran Church) follows Jerome in holding that they may be read “for example of life and instruction of manners; but yet doth it not apply them to establish any doctrine” (Article VI). Other Reformed Churches give them no canonical status at all. The Ethiopic Bible includes 1 Enoch and the book of Jubilees.

In the Roman, Greek, and other ancient communions the Bible, together with the living tradition of the church in some sense, constitutes the ultimate authority. In the churches of the Reformation, on the other hand, the Bible alone is the final court of appeal in matters of doctrine and practice. Thus Article VI of the Church of England affirms: “Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation; so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.” To the same effect the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1.2) lists the 39 books of the Old Testament and the 27 of the New Testament as “all . . . given by inspiration of God, to be the rule of faith and life.”

THE TWO TESTAMENTS

The word “testament” in the designations “Old Testament” and “New Testament,” given to the two divisions of the Bible, goes back through Latin *testamentum* to Greek *diatheke*, which in most of its occurrences in the Greek Bible means “covenant” rather than “testament.” In Jeremiah 31:31, a new covenant is foretold which will supersede that which God made with Israel in the wilderness (cf. Exod. 24:7ff). “By calling this covenant ‘new,’ he has made the first one obsolete” (Heb. 8:13). The New Testament writers see the fulfillment of the prophecy of the new covenant in the new order inaugurated by the work of Christ; his own words of institution (1 Cor. 11:25) give the authority for this interpretation. The Old Testament books, then, are so called because of their close association with the history of the “old covenant;” the New Testament books are so called because they are the foundation documents of the “new covenant.” An approach to our common use of the term “Old Testament” appears in 2 Corinthians 3:14, “when the old covenant is read,” although Paul probably means the law, the basis of the old covenant, rather than the whole volume of Hebrew Scripture. The terms “Old Testament” and “New Testament” for the two collections of books came into general Christian use in the later part of the second century; Tertullian rendered *diatheke* into Latin by *instrumentum* (a legal document) and also by *testamentum*; it was the latter word that survived, unfortunately, since the two parts of the Bible are not “testaments” in the ordinary sense of the term.

The Old Testament

In the Hebrew Bible the books are arranged in three divisions: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. The Law comprises the Pentateuch, the five “books of Moses.” The Prophets fall into two subdivisions: the “Former Prophets,” comprising Joshua, Judges,

Samuel, and Kings; and the “Latter Prophets,” comprising Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and “The Book of the Twelve Prophets.” The Writings contain the rest of the books: first are Psalms, Proverbs, and Job; then the five “Scrolls,” namely Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther; and finally Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles. The total is traditionally reckoned as twenty-four, but these twenty-four correspond exactly to our common reckoning of thirty-nine, since in the latter reckoning the Minor Prophets are counted as twelve books, and Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, and Ezra-Nehemiah as two each. There were other ways of counting the same twenty-four books in antiquity; in one (attested by Josephus) the total was brought down to twenty-two; in another (known to Jerome) it was raised to twenty-seven.

The origin of the arrangement of books in the Hebrew Bible cannot be traced; the threefold division is frequently believed to correspond to the three stages in which the books received canonical recognition, but there is no direct evidence for this.

In the Septuagint the books are arranged according to similarity of subject matter. The Pentateuch is followed by the historical books, these are followed by the books of poetry and wisdom, and these by the prophets. It is this order which, in its essential features, is perpetuated (via the Vulgate) in most Christian editions of the Bible. In some respects this order is truer to chronological sequence of the narrative contents than that of the Hebrew Bible; for example, Ruth appears immediately after Judges (since it records things that happened “in the days when the judges ruled”), and the work of the chronicler appears in the order Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah.

The threefold division of the Hebrew Bible is reflected in the wording of Luke 24:44 (“the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms”); more commonly the New Testament refers to “the Law and the Prophets” (see Matt. 7:12) or “Moses and the Prophets” (see Luke 16:29).

The divine revelation that the Old Testament records was conveyed in two principal ways—by mighty works and prophetic words. These two modes of revelation are bound up indissolubly together. The acts of mercy and judgment by which the God of Israel made himself known to his covenant people would not have carried their proper message had they not been interpreted to them by the prophets—the “spokesmen” of God who received and communicated his word. For example, the events of the Exodus would not have acquired their abiding significance for the Israelites if Moses had not told them that in these events the God of their fathers was acting for their deliverance, in accordance with his ancient promises, so that they might be his people and he their God. On the other hand, Moses’ words would have been fruitless apart from their vindication in the events of the Exodus. We may compare the similarly significant role of Samuel at the time of the Philistine menace, of the great eighth-century prophets when Assyria was sweeping all before her, of Jeremiah and Ezekiel when the kingdom of Judah came to an end, and so forth.

This interplay of mighty work and prophetic word in the Old Testament explains why history and prophecy are so intermingled throughout its pages; it was no doubt some realization of this that led the Jews to include the chief historical books among the Prophets. But not only do the Old Testament writings record this progressive twofold revelation of God; they record at the same time men’s response to God’s revelation—a response sometimes obedient, too often disobedient. In this Old Testament record of the response of those to whom the word of God came, the New Testament finds practical instruction for Christians; of the Israelites’ rebellion in the wilderness and the disasters which ensued Paul writes: “These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come” (1 Cor. 10:11, NIV).

Regarding its place in the Christian Bible, the Old Testament is

preparatory in character: what “God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets” waited for its completion in what was “spoken to us by his Son” (Heb. 1:1-2, NIV). Yet the Old Testament was the Bible that the apostles and other preachers of the gospel in the earliest days of Christianity took with them when they proclaimed Jesus as the divinely sent Messiah, Lord, and Savior: they found in it clear witness to Christ (John 5:39) and a plain setting forth of the way of salvation through faith in him (Rom. 3:21; 2 Tim. 3:15). For their use of the Old Testament they had the authority and example of Christ himself; and the church ever since has done well when it has followed the precedent set by him and his apostles and recognized the Old Testament as Christian Scripture. “What was indispensable to the Redeemer must always be indispensable to the redeemed” (G. A. Smith).

The New Testament

The New Testament stands to the Old Testament in the relation of fulfillment to promise. If the Old Testament records what “God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets,” the New Testament records that final word which he spoke in his Son, in which all the earlier revelation was summed up, confirmed, and transcended. The mighty works of the Old Testament revelation culminate in the redemptive work of Christ; the words of the Old Testament prophets receive their fulfillment in him. But he is not only God’s crowning revelation to man; he is also man’s perfect response to God—the high priest as well as the apostle of our confession (Heb. 3:1). If the Old Testament records the witness of those who saw the day of Christ before it dawned, the New Testament records the witness of those who saw and heard him in the days of his flesh, and who came to know and proclaim the significance of his coming more fully, by the power of his Spirit, after his resurrection from the dead.

The New Testament has been accepted by the great majority of Christians, for the past 1,600 years, as comprising twenty-seven books. These twenty-seven fall naturally into four divisions: (1) the four Gospels, (2) the Acts of the Apostles, (3) twenty-one letters written by apostles and “apostolic men,” and (4) Revelation. This order is not only logical, but roughly chronological so far as the subject matter of the documents is concerned; it does not correspond, however, to the order in which they were written.

The first New Testament documents to be written were the earlier epistles of Paul. These (together, possibly, with the Epistle of James) were written between A.D. 48 and 60, before even the earliest of the Gospels was written. The four Gospels belong to the decades between 60 and 100, and it is to these decades too that all (or nearly all) the other New Testament writings are to be assigned. Whereas the writing of the Old Testament books was spread over a period of a thousand years or more, the New Testament books were written within a century.

The New Testament writings were not gathered together in the form which we know immediately after they were penned. At first the individual Gospels had a local and independent existence in the constituencies for which they were originally composed. By the beginning of the second century, however, they were brought together and began to circulate as a fourfold record. When this happened, Acts was detached from Luke, with which it had formed one work in two volumes, and embarked on a separate but not unimportant career of its own.

Paul’s letters were preserved at first by the communities or individuals to whom they were sent. But by the end of the first century there is evidence to suggest that his surviving correspondence began to be collected into a Pauline corpus, which quickly circulated among the churches—first a shorter corpus of ten letters and soon afterwards a longer one of thirteen, enlarged by the inclusion of the three Pastoral Epistles. Within the Pauline corpus the letters

appear to have been arranged not in chronological order but in descending order of length. This principle may still be recognized in the order found in most editions of the New Testament today: the letters to churches come before the letters to individuals, and within these two subdivisions they are arranged so that the longest comes first and the shortest last. (The only departure from this scheme is that Galatians comes before Ephesians, although Ephesians is slightly the longer of the two.)

With the Gospel collection and the Pauline corpus, and Acts to serve as a link between the two, we have the beginning of the New Testament Canon as we know it. The early church, which inherited the Hebrew Bible (or the Greek version of the Septuagint) as its sacred Scriptures, was not long in setting the new evangelic and apostolic writings alongside the Law and the Prophets, and in using them for the propagation and defense of the gospel and in Christian worship. Thus Justin Martyr, about the middle of the second century, describes how Christians in their Sunday meetings read “the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets” (*Apology* 1.67). It was natural, then, that when Christianity spread among people who spoke other languages than Greek, the New Testament should be translated from Greek into those languages for the benefit of new converts. There were Latin and Syriac versions of the New Testament by A.D. 200, and a Coptic one within the following century.

THE MESSAGE OF THE BIBLE—————

The Bible has played, and continues to play, a notable part in the history of civilization. Many languages have been reduced to writing for the first time in order that the Bible, in whole or in part, might be translated into them in written form. And this is but a minor sample of the civilizing mission of the Bible in the world.

This civilizing mission is the direct effect of the central mes-

sage of the Bible. It may be thought surprising that one should speak of a central message in a collection of writings that reflects the history of civilization in the Near East over several millennia. But a central message there is, and it is the recognition of this that has led to the common treatment of the Bible as a book, and not simply a collection of books—just as the Greek plural *biblia* (books) became the Latin singular *biblia* (the book).

The Bible's central message is the story of salvation, and throughout both Testaments three strands in this unfolding story can be distinguished: the bringer of salvation, the way of salvation, and the heirs of salvation. This could be reworded in terms of the covenant idea by saying that the central message of the Bible is God's covenant with men, and that the strands are the mediator of the covenant, the basis of the covenant, and the covenant people. God himself is the Savior of his people; it is he who confirms his covenant-mercy with them. The bringer of salvation, the mediator of the covenant, is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The way of salvation, the basis of the covenant, is God's grace, calling forth from his people a response of faith and obedience. The heirs of salvation, the covenant people, are the Israel of God, the church of God.

The continuity of the covenant people from the Old Testament to the New Testament is obscured for the reader of the common English Bible because "church" is an exclusively New Testament word, and he naturally thinks of it as something which began in the New Testament period. But the reader of the Greek Bible was confronted by no new word when he found *ekklēsia* in the New Testament; he had already met it in the Septuagint as one of the words used to denote Israel as the "assembly" of the Lord's people. To be sure, it has a new and fuller meaning in the New Testament. The old covenant people had to die with him in order to rise with him to new life—a new life in which national restrictions had disappeared. Jesus provides in himself the

vital continuity between the old Israel and the new, and his faithful followers were both the righteous remnant of the old and the nucleus of the new. The Servant Lord and his servant people bind the two Testaments together.

The message of the Bible is God's message to man, communicated "at many times and in various ways" (Heb. 1:1, NIV) and finally incarnated in Christ. Thus "the authority of the holy scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man or church, but wholly upon God (who is truth itself), the author thereof; and therefore it is to be received, because it is the word of God" (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 1.4).

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