

**THE LIVING WORD OF GOD:
APPRECIATING, TRUSTING, & USING THE SCRIPTURES**

Notes For Week One: From The Mind Of God To Our Lives

Believers in Jesus use the Bible in many ways, both good and bad. We are so accustomed to the Scriptures that we usually give little thought to the assumptions and preconceptions behind the ways that we use them. Using the Scriptures as God intended does not require any particular degree of knowledge or intelligence - humility and honesty are far more important.

Examining Our Assumptions

Even when we use the Scriptures in seemingly basic, simple ways, often we are in fact supposing a great deal. It is easy to become so fixated on details or results that we forget the spiritual wisdom and the overall perspective of the Scriptures. At other times, we may be correct in our assumptions, yet not fully appreciate their spiritual implications.

Whenever we say or think something along the lines of, "this Scripture says that we should do thus and so . . ." or "this Scripture says that we should believe such and such . . .", we are making several assumptions. First, we are assuming that we understand the Scripture correctly, and we are assuming that it is legitimate to apply it to the situation or topic at hand. Perhaps less obviously, we are assuming that the printed Bible we are reading is an accurate expression of God's thoughts and words.

Our role in using the Scriptures involves one set of assumptions. Whenever we interpret and/or apply Scripture, we do so through a set of presuppositions, whether we intend to or not. Most often, we apply a type of rationalistic methodology that we have never really questioned as carefully as we should have. Perhaps there are other times when, because of our emotional involvement in a topic, we stretch the meaning of Scripture without even realizing what we are doing, by applying it to a situation far different from the use God intended for it.

God, of course, plays his own crucial part in giving us the Scriptures. We generally, and properly, assume that God's initial inspiration was perfect. Yet we usually do not consider what we mean by this, or how it can affect our usage of God's Word. There is also a significant human element even before we interpret the Bible. To get versions of Scripture that the average person can read, they have to be translated from ancient languages. This in turn relies on ancient manuscripts - but the originals of biblical writings long ago disintegrated, leaving translators to rely on manuscripts that themselves had been copied and recopied, usually over many years.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Think of several ways that you or others have used Scripture recently. What common assumptions have we made about the ways we use the Bible? What assumptions do we usually make about God's role in providing the Bible?

The Nature Of God's Word (Thoughts From Isaiah 55:8-13)

Although most of the ways that we use the Bible are legitimate (or at least nearly so), we often miss the most important things that God wants us to learn and to think about. It is human nature for us to focus our attention and efforts on our own desires, our own beliefs, our own actions, and our own accomplishments, but God's Word is about much more than these things.

In Isaiah 55:8-13, the prophet shares a deep appreciation of God's powerful and living Word*, and he gives us a glimpse of some of its most important characteristics. Isaiah reminds us that God's ways and thoughts are far different from ours, and that indeed they are on a far higher plane than any on which human minds can even operate (55:8-9). Now, we are familiar with this idea in at least one way, since we do know that God frequently does things that we cannot understand or appreciate in the short-term, due to God's much greater knowledge. Yet what Isaiah is saying goes beyond any specific teaching or action of God.

Note that Isaiah is speaking of God's word in a somewhat generalized sense, which includes the Scriptures and also the other ways that he expresses his will. Our concern for now, of course, is in how his thoughts here apply to our use and understanding of the Bible.

In truth, God's entire perspective on everything is far different and far higher than ours. When we study the Bible, therefore, we simply cannot expect to do so using the same human logic and human priorities that we apply to other fields or decisions. This is one of the primary reasons why the Scriptures are so misused and misunderstood. We must do everything possible to clear our minds of fleshly preconceptions when we study the Bible. This is a difficult task, but the more we can do it, the greater then is our trust in God's Word, and the more it helps us.

The prophet also tells us that God's Word is purposeful (55:10-11). Once it goes out from God, it does not return empty, for it always has an effect. Isaiah compares it with natural processes such as rain or snow, which by their very nature continue to have an effect long after their obvious initial manifestations. So too, no one who reads the Bible comes away unchanged. Those who read it with reverence and devotion grow closer to God each time they read it, while those who read with a spirit of resistance and pride will come away from reading the Bible even more hardened.

Even those who put little effort into reading the Bible will be changed more than they realize. If they have even a little sincerity, they will find that the things they read eventually have an effect, even if the Word works more slowly in them than it does in those who read it with diligence and devotion. On the other hand, those who read the Bible solely as a meaningless routine, with no intention of learning or changing, may well find themselves gradually hardened, perhaps not as quickly as those who approach the Bible with active skepticism, but hardened nonetheless.

Finally, God's Word has the power to produce life and joy (55:12-13). The images that the prophet uses are intended to emphasize these blessings. Isaiah's images of thorn bushes being transformed into pine trees, and briars being changed to myrtle trees, remind us that the word of God can bring life to anyone, anywhere. This imagery also reminds us that Scripture was not given to us for purposes of debate or competition. The truths of Scripture are far beyond any of our mortal minds, and anything we know about God is by his grace.

For Study or Discussion: The next time that you study your Bible, try making a brief review of Isaiah 55:8-13. How can these basic ideas help you in your own study? What do they tell us in general about God's perspective on the things he teaches us?

The Origins & Usage Of The Bible: An Overview

We have observed that there are several key stages in the process by which Scripture comes from God and affects our lives and beliefs. We shall study each of these during the course of our series; yet it is always important to keep in mind that they all fit together. In themselves, these 'steps' are somewhat arbitrary; so this model is intended only as an aid to organize our thoughts.

As implied above, the means by which God communicates through his written Word can be roughly outlined as follows: inspiration, preservation, translation, interpretation, and application. The first three steps collectively describe how the Word goes from the mouth of God to the written page, and thus they describe the origins of the Bible. The final two describe how the Word goes from the written page to our lives and ministries - that is, the usage of the Bible.

The creation of the writings in the Bible began with the act of inspiration by God. As Hebrews 1:1-2 implies, the initial inspiration can take a number of different forms, as can the specific ways that the Spirit guides the persons chosen as the human authors of the inspired books. For example, most of Paul's epistles were inspired and probably written on one occasion, or at least over a very short time period. On the other hand, the Psalms were written by many authors, and collected together over a period of many years*, also through the guidance of the Spirit. The great variety of the origins and literary forms of the books of the Bible is one of its most significant features, because all of the many types of writings still point in the same direction.

* In between these would be a book like Luke. In Luke 1:1-4, the author describes how he undertook a careful investigation to collect his material before then writing an orderly account.

The original forms of the books of the Bible are often referred to as the "autographs". Although we are more familiar with this word as it is used in everyday speech, it literally means 'self-written', and it is the technical term for a manuscript that is written in the author's own hand. We thus distinguish the original autographs, which no longer exist physically, from the hand-copied manuscripts that are now used to preserve and translate the Bible.

In discussing inspiration, there is also the question of which writings are actually divinely inspired. The term "canon" (literally, a standard of measurement) is used to refer to those books that are accepted as truly belonging to the Bible. There are two different questions here: first, how can we be certain that all of the books in our Bible truly belong there, and second, how can we be sure that no other writings should have been included as well. In fact, a number of denominations of Christianity include additional works in their versions of the Bible.

The study of the preservation* of the Bible's original form primarily revolves around the ancient manuscripts that still survive, and the question of whether they accurately represent the original form of the Word as it came from God's mouth. The Bible and all other ancient writings survive to us only in second-hand form, through manuscripts that were copied from a series of copies of the original, often stretching over several generations.

* Some authors prefer to call this process the transmission, rather than preservation, of Scripture.

The nature and quality of ancient writing materials meant that very little survived into the distant future without both care and luck. Even some of the works by the greatest writers of antiquity have been lost. Besides the physical obstacles to preservation, human-made obstacles such as persecution and negligence also contributed to the challenge of preserving ancient writings. As we shall see, though, the quantity and quality of ancient manuscript evidence for the Bible are both outstanding when compared with other ancient writings.

The process of translating Scriptures into one's own language is indispensable in making the Word of God a part of our everyday lives, rather than being purely a scholar's domain. But there are many challenges to translation that make it much more than a process of simple word-for-word substitution. This is even truer when applied to ancient languages, which can be very different in form and structure from our own. Hebrew, in particular, is much different from any of the European languages that may be more familiar to us*. Ancient Greek, on the other hand,

is a European language, somewhat similar to our own; yet its extremely detailed and precise nature makes translating more difficult**.

* For example, ancient Hebrew words contained vowels, but there were no letters for them, so they were not used in the original written form of the language.

** For example, ancient Greek has 17 definite articles, all roughly equivalent to our one word "the".

The history of Bible translation can be divided into three general eras. In the early church, the gospel quickly spread across Southern Europe, Northern Africa, and Western Asia, and the New Testament was soon translated into the main languages of those regions. By the time that Rome fell, there were many different versions of the entire Bible. But after the 5th century, the fall of Rome, the onset of the Middle Ages, and the church's departure from New Testament teachings all combined to slow and eventually halt the process of Bible translation.

Throughout most of the Middle Ages, the established church even opposed and discouraged the reading of the Bible by the average church member, and church scholars and clergy read it almost exclusively in their own standard Latin translation. Not until the 14th century did pioneers like England's John Wycliffe begin to call for the Bible again to be made available in the languages of the common person. Such efforts were vigorously opposed by the established church and by many other authorities of the era, and it was not until the 16th century that the Reformation and the recently-invented printing press combined to usher in a new era of Bible translation into many languages and versions, which has continued up to our own day.

Shifting now to our usage of the Bible, we look first at interpretation. An awareness of the original audience and purpose of the books of the Bible can be very helpful in interpreting them. Interpretation should, of course, be done with the primary emphasis on the biblical text itself, with historical background and other reference materials often serving to make the Scriptures clearer or more vivid.

The context of a Scripture is usually the best starting point in interpretation, whether it is historical context, literary context, or theological context. No biblical text was ever without some important meaning to its original hearers, just as no passage is ever without some spiritual meaning for us today. It is also a good idea to note the structure of a book. Many books are arranged differently from the ways we would have edited them using purely human logic.

The process of application then allows God's Word to affect our lives and ministries. Just as correct interpretation is best based on a reliable translation, and a reliable translation can only come from manuscripts that have accurately preserved God's original words, so too a valid application ought to be made on a foundation of careful interpretation. That is, knowing what a Scripture meant to its original hearers helps us know how to apply it properly in our own lives. The outward details may well be very different, but if we study with care, we shall usually see that the spiritual principles are similar.

Application is even more uncertain than interpretation, because we are often looking for one thing when God wants to teach us another. But if we take the time to appreciate and respect what the Scriptures teach, we shall often find that they have more meaning than we could have imagined if we only looked for a simple, obvious application. God's Word has much to teach us not only about God himself, and about his plans, but also about our own lives, ministries, and relationships. His greatest insights are revealed to those who most appreciate his Word.

Of particular importance is the difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament is too often ignored, and too often misused. It is full of spiritual insight and wisdom, but only if we view it from the perspective of the gospel. Its laws and commands are not part of the New Covenant, but the spiritual principles behind them are the same.

One of our primary concerns in this study is, of course, the reliability of Scripture. Even the most faithful believer in the Bible acknowledges that the Bible has been taught, explained, and used in a great many different ways, many of them highly inappropriate. The simple pattern we have outlined can help us see where most of these distortions and difficulties come into play. In the first part, the process is guided closely by God, and is relatively uniform. In the second part, God allows us to exercise our free will in how we use the Scriptures that he has inspired; so there is then a great deal of variation as to how different persons interpret and apply the Bible.

Obviously, in its original, inspired form, the Bible was flawless. The process of preserving it in manuscript form introduced only a very small number of variations, which generally are completely insignificant. Translation does produce more variation, and on occasion even actual errors, and yet any standard translation corresponds very closely with the originals in every important respect. It is in the ways that the Bible is interpreted and applied that the greatest variations and almost all of the significant errors come into play. Not surprisingly, these are also the stages in which God has allowed humans to exercise their free will to the greatest extent.

In the weeks ahead, we shall now go back through and study the inspiration, preservation, translation, interpretation, and application of the Bible. Even our introductory survey demonstrates that, to a large extent, these are interrelated, and so we do not want to treat any of these as completely unrelated topics. Our general plan, though, will be to concentrate, at least initially, on the first part of the process: inspiration, preservation, and translation. In this way, we can maintain a solid foundation as we approach each new topic, and we can develop a growing understanding of the Bible's origins and usage.

For Discussion or Study: Looking back again at these basic steps in God's communication through his written Word, identify any particular questions you have about each of them. What do you wish you understood better about the Bible's origins and use? What might you have always wondered about? Then, consider the question of where distortions and difficulties in the usage of the Bible come into play. If you can understand where in this process most of them arise, how can this help you?

Bibliographical Note

By the nature of our subject, the material for this class will be based on many different sources. Most of these sources will be given later, as we come to specific topics each week.

A highly recommended source for many of the topics in the class is *The Origin of the Bible*, edited by Philip Comfort. There is also a shorter, simpler, but very worthwhile book by Edward Goodrick called *Is My Bible the Inspired Word of God?*, which is unfortunately out of print and is now hard to find. With some of our topics, it may also help to have a New Testament survey and/or an Old Testament survey. You are welcome to see me if you would like any recommendations for reading or study.

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THE LIVING WORD OF GOD: APPRECIATING, TRUSTING, & USING THE SCRIPTURES

Notes For Week Two: Inspiration Of Scripture - Basic Ideas

We know that the Scriptures are inspired by God, but what does this mean? Divine inspiration gives the Bible an authority that other books lack, yet God uses his authority differently than humans expect him to. Understanding divine inspiration is more than accepting the Bible's authority - it also means appreciating the grace and intimacy that God put into his Word.

Review

The general way that God speaks to us through the Scriptures can be seen as having two basic stages. First the Word goes from the mouth of God to the written page, and then it goes from the written page to our lives and ministries. Each of these can also be broken down a little further.

God's inspiration is the first and most important part. The original documents (autographs) no longer exist, so the text had to be preserved (for example, by copying and re-copying documents as older copies disintegrated) over the course of many years. Finally, to produce the Bibles that we read in our own language(s), the text had to be translated from the original ancient languages.

Once the Scriptures are available to us in written form, there are two more basic steps. When we use a Scripture, we first of all interpret its meaning, and then we apply it to our lives, beliefs, or ministries. Interpretation* involves clarifying terms, understanding the context, and the like. Application** could involve questions about the relevance of a passage to present-day situations, the degree to which we should emulate examples in the Bible, and similar concerns.

* A common technical term for interpretation is "exegesis". The term is also used in the study of non-biblical writings, to refer to the process by which we seek to understand the background, context, and primary meaning of something written by someone else.

** The fancy term for application is "hermeneutics". Such terms occasionally have relevance, but often they are used by commentators merely to make their pet methods seem more important than they are.

All Scripture Is God-Breathed (Readings in 2 Peter 1, 2 Timothy 3, & John 3)

The literal meaning of the word 'inspire' is 'breath into'; and indeed the Bible itself tells us that Scripture is God-breathed. This has many implications for our study and usage of the Scriptures. From the beginning, God has made it clear that he does not use his authority arbitrarily or impersonally. God's Word is full of the grace and truth that characterize God himself.

Peter, an eyewitness to Scriptural events, shares some thoughts on the origins of Scripture (2 Peter 1:16-21) and gives an example of an event he saw at God's initiation. The writers of the Bible are a large and diverse group, and the books of the Bible contain a variety of material. There is always an element of faith involved in believing the Bible, but it is not a blind faith; it is a faith based on reliable testimony from many witnesses spread out across many centuries.

Peter refers to "the word of the prophets made more certain" (verse 19). The gospel confirms the message of the prophets, and thus makes their teachings more certain. Conversely, the writings of the prophets foretold Jesus and his ministry, so they in turn validate the truth of the gospel. The Bible as a whole has a consistency and unity of purpose that is remarkable for such a large collection of teachings compiled over such a lengthy time span.

For anyone seeking the truth, the Bible is an accurate guide, and even those who have not yet been convicted by the gospel message will do well to study and consider its teachings until the time comes when "the day dawns", and they see the truth more clearly. "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17).

Prophecies and other Scriptures did not come about "by the prophet's own interpretation" (verses 20-21), but rather by the work of the Spirit, who "carried along" the persons who physically wrote the Bible. The value of the Bible and its teachings hinge on whether this is true. Unlike a work of human philosophy or ethical teaching, the Bible overtly claims to have been written by the direct inspiration and authority of God. This claim is stated repeatedly in the Scriptures, giving us no choice but to decide whether we accept or reject the Bible on that basis.

The concept that all Scripture is God-breathed is familiar from 2 Timothy 3:14-17. Paul uses the word θεοπνευστος ("theopneustos"), literally suggesting that God breathed out the Scriptures. In encouraging Timothy to remain faithful to the truth, Paul reminds him of the divinely inspired nature of the Scriptures, which can be a source of strength to Timothy both in trials and in everyday situations. Paul's word choice emphasizes the personal nature of God's Word, for it was breathed, not dictated or announced in an impersonal fashion.

Another link with the nature of the Spirit and his work can be seen in John 3:6-8. Jesus, talking to Nicodemus, compares the Spirit to the wind, in that both of them seem intangible yet can produce results that can be easily and clearly perceived. In fact, the Greek word πνευμα ("pneuma") can mean three different things in English: spirit, wind, or breath. Through its Latin equivalent "spiritus", we see these closely related ideas reflected in many English words, ranging from 'inspiration' and 'respiratory' to 'spirit' and 'spiritual' (and many others).

In the Old Testament*, the Hebrew word רוח ("ruah") can also mean spirit, wind, or breath. The point is that there is a close link between the breath of God and the Spirit of God, and this link should be remembered when we talk about the inspiration of the Scriptures, just as Peter (above) described Scripture being written by men who were "carried along" by the Holy Spirit. Remember also the description in Hebrews 4:12 of God's Word as "living and active".

* Many Old Testament passages also remind us of the link between God, breath, and life. In Genesis 2:7, we see that God breathed into the first human he created, in order to produce life. Job 33:4 and 34:14 also remind us that life both came and is sustained by the breath of God. Psalm 33:6 extends this idea to all of creation. On the other hand, verses like Jeremiah 51:17 and Habakkuk 2:19 point out that idols are worthless because they have no breath in them, and thus do not live.

Belief in divine inspiration should mean more than simply acknowledging God's authority in his Word. We should also recognize the vitality and intimacy that went into it. The Bible has authority, but it is much more than a law book. The Bible has wisdom, but it is much more than a philosophy book. The Bible is flawless and perfect, but it is much more than a theorem in geometry or a proposition in abstract logic. It is all this and much more; it is living and active.

The concept of inspiration should affect our use of Scripture more than it does. Although we accept the absolute authority of the Scriptures, this is only the most rudimentary aspect of divine inspiration. Too often our usage of Scripture is overly intellectualized and rationalistic; we too likely to use Scripture for debates over stereotyped 'issues'; or we can trivialize the Bible by using it only to 'get' others to do the things we think they should. God's inspiration of the Scripture was deliberately personal, and thus his primary motivation is neither doctrinal nor behavioral - it is relational and grace-oriented. Does our use of a passage make us more

compassionate, more humble, more appreciative towards God? Or does it produce self-satisfaction, giving us the feeling that we are right and others are wrong?

It will always require faith to have confidence in God's ability to communicate with his people, but he has given us good reasons to have this faith. The skeptic's perspective is simply to say that all the things that had to happen, in order for the Scriptures to reach us in a reliable and divinely inspired form, are just not possible. Skeptics who do not admit even this possibility will often refuse to listen even to the most significant evidence for the Bible's reliability. We shall thus spend little time in our class on issues that would interest only hardened skeptics, since evidence is usually not their problem.

The seeker, on the other hand, would believe if he or she were persuaded, but currently has the perspective, "Could it really have happened?" They may want to believe, or they may be afraid to believe, but in either case they have questions - which are usually valid ones so long as they are honestly seeking the truth. One of the goals of our class will be to deal with several of the most significant questions that honest seekers frequently ask about the Bible.

The believer's perspective is to look at all the things that God has done to preserve and proclaim his Word to us, and to praise and glorify him for his wisdom and power. The sincere believer knows there are legitimate questions that a seeker could ask, but also knows that God is more than capable of communicating accurately and completely with his people. But this is not all. A believer who truly appreciates God's Word, and who understands God's nature, is also humble before God and compassionate towards others, even if they are unbelievers or weak believers.

For Discussion or Study: How does it help us to know that the gospels and prophets can confirm each other's message? How should it influence our reading of the Bible when we remember that the Scriptures did not have their origin in human will or wisdom? See also the Scriptures referenced above in their original contexts. How does this further help us to understand what it means that the Bible is inspired by God?

The Original Inspired Documents

The original, divinely-inspired written texts (or autographs) of the books of the Bible no longer exist. Thus, although this is the one step in the development of the Scriptures that we know to have been completed with perfection, it is also the point at which we have the least tangible evidence. The Scriptures themselves do, though, tell us several things about the autographs.

The Spirit worked to produce the original written Word of God through faithful human writers, who were willing to let themselves be carried along as God and his Spirit willed. When we read the various books of the Bible, we can sometimes see differences in the style and form of expression, because it is God's gracious will to grant faithful humans the extraordinary privilege of participating in his plans, with the Bible being just one example of this. This does not mean that these human authors exercised their own free will in determining what to write; rather, it is an illustration of the way that God used their own abilities, efforts, and time in ways that carried out his own will*. Now, let us look at some brief examples.

* Here again, commentators often indulge themselves in meaningless debates about what this means. Disputes over the validity of 'thought inspiration', verbal inspiration', and 'plenary inspiration' miss the real point of divine inspiration. If we understand God's purpose in inspiring the Scriptures, then it makes little difference whether the exact words were chosen by God, or whether some wordings or expressions come from the writer. Such things would only matter if the Scriptures were meant to be studied forensically and impersonally - which, unfortunately, is what many believers try to do with them.

Consider the gospels. The gospel of John is based on eyewitness testimony and experience (John 19:35, 20:30-31, 21:24-25). Luke, on the other hand, devoted his time and effort to an investigation of the things Jesus had said and done, and then compiled it into a book (see Luke 1:1-4). Whereas the Spirit guided Luke in studying, researching, and corresponding, the Spirit instead guided John in determining which, of the many things he saw and heard when he was with Jesus, were significant enough to be written down.

In the prophetic books, the prophets often tell us about the call to prophetic ministry that they received (see, for example, Isaiah 6 or Ezekiel 1). But most prophetic books are not chronological narratives. Most of them are thematic collections of writings made over the course of many years of ministry. Some of the prophets did and said other things that they did not include when the Spirit guided them in producing what we read today.

Books like Psalms and Proverbs were also collected over a period of many years, but they differ in including material from many different human authors. The Spirit in this case worked not only to inspire the original thoughts and expressions, but also to collect them in the way that God willed, as the material came into being over a period of time.

The Old Testament historical books often describe events that took place over many years. For example, the first five books have for many centuries been understood by believers to have been written by Moses. Naturally, he could not have personally seen the events of Genesis, and thus the Spirit's work in this case included guiding Moses to earlier written compilations*, which he could edit into his inspired writing. The Spirit likewise had to guide those authors in collecting material from appropriate sources, and then in compiling it in the way that God willed.

* Another likely source is oral histories or recitals of events in the distant past. This is common to many ancient cultures (and even some present-day cultures). Oral transmission is known, for example, to have been the means of preserving the original text of the Koran in the earliest years of Islam.

All of these originals have been unavailable for many centuries, so we can only reconstruct certain aspects of them. What is important is not so much the physical form as the content. Can we be confident that the Bibles we read today correspond as closely as possible to the things that God actually said? A seeker may ask why we do not have the original inspired autographs, since they would surely make it easier to answer the objections of skeptics.

One reason, of course, is that original autographs do not exist for any ancient writings, so there is no reason from either a historical or a scientific perspective to expect that original manuscripts of the Bible should exist, either. But there are other, more spiritually significant points to consider.

God always provides us with plenty of factual evidence to instill confidence in his wisdom and power, and yet he wishes there always to be an element of faith. Humans have a marked tendency to give undue honor to persons or objects, and not enough respect to spiritual truths. God wants to give us grace, and he hopes for us to have faith. Our focus should be on these and other spiritual qualities, not on our own intelligence or methods, or even on physical evidence.

For Discussion or Study: Besides those given above, what other examples are there of the ways the Spirit guided the human authors of the Bible? Why do you think that God did not preserve the original autographs? If they existed, what benefits or drawbacks would there be to having them available?

Another major issue involved in divine inspiration concerns the designation of certain works as divinely-inspired. Both believers and unbelievers alike often have misconceptions about the ways that certain writings were or were not included in what we call the Bible. After these introductory ideas (below), we shall spend the next few classes looking at the canon in detail.

The Bible could, of course, be described as a book of books, or a collection of books. It has always been understood by believers that the canon (books regarded as divinely inspired) includes numerous works composed at different times*. Christians also understand that the canon contains a basic distinction between two testaments or covenants. Just as Christian faith and theology have always included an awareness that there was an original covenant with God's people Israel, later to be replaced with a more complete covenant in Christ, so also the church of Christ has always accepted both groups of inspired writings as part of its Scriptures or "Bible".

* Our word "Bible", in fact, did not originally mean "book" (singular), but rather came from "Biblia", a Medieval Latin word that in turn came from the Greek "biblia" (βιβλία), a plural form meaning "books".

There are a number of criteria for the inclusion (or exclusion) of various books in the canon, but there is one criterion regarding each testament that usually assumed primary importance. For the Old Testament canon, the acceptance or non-acceptance by the ancient Jews of a writing's inspired nature has been the main criterion in determining the Bible used in most non-Roman Catholic fellowships. The New Testament canon, on the other hand, was determined primarily by apostolic authority, as understood by the earliest generations of the church.

There are a number of common misconceptions about the formation of the Bible. Perhaps the most common one is that it was determined by a series of church councils, who simply selected the available works that best suited their pre-determined doctrine and plans. While there were indeed a number of councils in the early centuries of the church, their function regarding the Scriptures was quite different from what is often supposed by unbelievers.

Other misconceptions involve the human authors of the Scriptures. It is common to hypothesize that the authors of the Bible were not actual biblical figures, but were instead much later writers who used biblical settings to promote their own agendas*. Those with these theories may place excluded or ancient secular works on equal footing with the Bible. We shall spend the next few classes examining these and other issues related to the canon and the inspiration of the Bible.

* Just as one example, one such theory proposes that the prophetic book of Daniel was actually written many hundreds of years after its true date, during Israel's war for independence from the Greeks.

For Discussion or Study: Why is the concept of a "canon" important? How can it help us to be aware of the criteria for inclusion or exclusion? Are the views of the ancient Jews concerning what constituted Scripture still important to us? See if you can find some Old Testament references that reveal the ways that ancient Israel viewed the Scriptures.

Bibliographical Note

Besides the overall references suggested last time, two good books on similar topics are *The Books and the Parchments*, by F.F. Bruce (this has more technical detail) and *A General Introduction to the Bible: From Ancient Tablets to Modern Translations*, by David Ewert.

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Notes For Week Three: The Origins Of The Old Testament

The books that we call the Old Testament were, for many years, the only Scriptures that were inspired by God. Their origins, acceptance, and authenticity are important to us in several respects. It is helpful to be able to have full confidence in the Old Testament's validity, and it is also worth considering how we can most appropriately use these books.

Review

When God speaks to us through the Scriptures, the Word first goes from the mouth of God to the written page, through the initial inspiration, preservation of the text, and translation from the original ancient languages into modern languages. When we then use a Scripture, we interpret it, and then we apply it to our lives, beliefs, or ministries. (We often do not consciously distinguish between interpretation and application.) It is here that most problems with using the Bible occur.

While we accept all Scripture as God-breathed, we often do not appreciate the implications. Peter describes the process using the imagery of being "carried along by the Holy Spirit". (It is interesting that the Greek word for Spirit or spirit, "pneuma", can also mean wind or breath.) We should emphasize the personal and the dynamic, rather than clinical or legal analysis. Thus, although many common methods of interpreting and applying the Bible are erroneous, the solution is not to come up with a new method, for there are no perfect methods for studying the Bible. Rather, to use the Scriptures more wisely, it helps to remember that God is all-wise and all-powerful, but that his main concern is to know us and to forgive us, not to tell us what to do.

The original autographs of the Bible no longer exist, and thus an element of faith is inherent in our acceptance of the Scriptures as divinely-inspired. Another consideration is the canon, or list of books considered to be inspired by God. The basic criteria for inclusion or exclusion are: acceptance as such by ancient Israel (for the Old Testament), and apostolic origin and approval (for the New). Our next several lessons will go into some of the many questions involved.

The Antiquity & Importance Of The Old Testament (Readings in Luke 24)

From our perspective, there are several important questions about the Old Testament. The most basic ones concern its antiquity. The truth of Christianity rests in part on the existence of the Old Testament Scriptures, and on their acceptance by the ancient Jews, from well before the time of Jesus. Indeed, Jesus himself frequently called upon the Old Testament as a witness to him.

In Luke 24, as Jesus walked with two followers on the way to Emmaus, listening to their perplexed discussion of the crucifixion and the reports of the resurrection, he reproved them (Luke 24:25-27) for not knowing what the Scriptures (the Old Testament) said about the Christ. He then used these Scriptures to teach them what God had foretold about his Messianic ministry.

Later, with the Eleven (Luke 24:44-47), Jesus revealed what had been written about him in the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms. His death, his resurrection, and the proclamation of the forgiveness of sins through him are just a few of the many things foretold in the Old Testament. These passages illustrate the importance of the Old Testament in Christianity, and also the significance of knowing that the Old Testament books were in existence in Jesus' day.

There is a consistency of purpose between the two Testaments. The main goal of Jesus' ministry was to provide, through his blood, the grace that every human needs for forgiveness of sins. His ministry replaced the Levitical system, an absolutely necessary but inherently temporary means of providing atonement until the time of the Messiah. While the Old Testament should not be used in the same way as the New - and while it is easy to misinterpret or misuse it - it is no less inspired or less important spiritually. It points us to Jesus as surely as the gospel itself does.

The Old Testament contains many prophecies, about Jesus and other events, that remind us and convict us of God's power and wisdom. It contains many promises made to God's people - many of them fulfilled in Jesus - and thus teaches us about God's ability to fulfill his promises to us. It also teaches us many spiritual principles that have never changed, even though the ways we put them into practice* may be different under our new covenant in Christ.

* Note that this moves into the area of Interpretation and Application. A good way to approach the Old Testament is to look for shadows and realities. The commands of the Old Testament are obsolete, yet the principles behind them are still important, and are observed in more complete ways in the New Covenant.

There are a great many sources of historical evidence demonstrating that the books of our Old Testament existed and were widely circulated well before the time of Christ. The Septuagint version of the Old Testament, which translated the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek, is well-known in ancient history*, as a product of the renowned community of scholars in Alexandria, Egypt. We shall take a more detailed look at the Septuagint in the next class.

* The Septuagint also demonstrates the thorough preparations that God made for the coming of Jesus. Without a Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures, the early Christians would have had great difficulty in demonstrating to most of their audiences that Jesus fulfilled so many of the promises in the Old Testament.

An important piece of historical evidence is the work of Judas Maccabeus, a leader in the Jewish war for independence from the Greeks, in approximately 165 BC. In that era, the Seleucid (Syrian) ruler Antiochus Epiphanes did everything possible to suppress or eradicate Jewish cultural influences, with the Scriptures being a primary target. Judas thus made a full-scale effort to collect as many copies as possible of all the inspired writings. At the time, each book would generally have only been available on a separate scroll, and therefore one of Judas's projects was to draw up and circulate a list of precisely what constituted the inspired Scriptures, so that anyone could tell when a particular collection was complete. His work confirms the existence and acceptance of the Old Testament canonical writings well before the time of Christ.

The Dead Sea Scrolls are more familiar to the general public. Surviving manuscripts of the Hebrew text of the Old Testament are generally from a much later date than are manuscripts of the New Testament, for the simple reason that the ancient Jews considered it inappropriate to retain manuscripts of the Scriptures once they began to fall into a condition of physical deterioration*. Thus the discovery in the 1940's of the Dead Sea Scrolls brought to light an entire library of manuscripts far older than all previously known manuscripts of the Hebrew Old Testament*; and in particular, they dated from well before the time of Jesus.

* We shall discuss this further in a later class. Note that manuscripts of the Septuagint are available from much earlier dates than are the manuscripts in Hebrew, because the Septuagint was generally copied and preserved by Christians, rather than by the Jewish scholars who preserved the Hebrew text.

A group of ancient writings called targums are written records of long-standing oral traditions* among the Jews, and they also are evidence for the ancient dates of the Old Testament books. After the exile to Babylon, it became increasingly uncommon for the average Jew to speak Hebrew fluently. By the time of Christ, classical Hebrew had become strictly a scholar's

language, and only a small fraction of the Jewish community - even in Israel itself - understood it. Yet, the great importance of reading and studying the Scriptures meant that they had to be available in everyday language. The targums were the solution. After the return from exile, it became standard for public readings of the Hebrew Scriptures to be followed immediately by an oral paraphrase to translate and clarify the passage**. For many years, these 'targums' were spoken only, for fear that they could otherwise be misunderstood as constituting actual Scripture. Only after the time of Christ did their practicality finally lead to written targums becoming used.

* There is also another written account of earlier oral traditions called the Mishnah, which is a detailed codification of the many laws and applications based on the Scriptures, first written down about AD 200, but based on oral teachings that had been taught and handed down over the previous centuries.

** This practice is probably being illustrated in Nehemiah 8:7, when Ezra read the law, with the Levites then "giving the meaning so that the people could understand".

Amongst ancient Jewish authors, Josephus and Philo are the most significant in this respect. Flavius Josephus, writing in the last half of the first century AD, says that the Jewish Scriptures had been accepted as divinely inspired "for many ages" and says that in all that time no books had been added or subtracted. He also indicates that the 22- or 24-book canon (see below) was standard in his time*. Philo of Alexandria was born about 20 BC, and lived until about AD 40 or 50, thus overlapping the entire life of Christ. His extensive writings reveal that the Jewish community in Alexandria commonly accepted the standard canon in his lifetime**.

* Josephus discusses all of these topics in his essay "Against Apion". Josephus actually counts the canon as 22 books, following the variant described below, with two shorter books attached to other books to make the number of books match the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. But his canon contains the same material as do the more usual 24-book Jewish canon and our 39-book Old Testament.

** Philo is also significant in another respect - as an Alexandrian, he used the Greek Septuagint exclusively in his writings, but although it contained the apocryphal books, Philo does not accept them as canonical. Philo, then, shows that even Hellenistic Jews in Alexandria did not see the apocrypha as canonical.

Jesus' acceptance of the Old Testament, and its usage by the New Testament writers, is one of the most important of all evidences for its validity. In Luke 24 (see above) and many other Scriptures, Jesus accepted the Old Testament books as divinely inspired and authoritative, and knew himself to be the fulfillment of all they contained. The writers of the New Testament also quote as Scripture most of the books of the Old Testament, either referring to them explicitly as Scripture, using the understood phrasing "it is written", or sometimes saying something like, "the Lord has said". There are direct quotes in this fashion from 24 of the 39 books in our Old Testament, and there are clear indirect references to most of the others*. Note that there are occasions on which other ancient writers are quoted, but never in a way that puts them on the level with the actual Scriptures**.

* While it can be subjective as to whether an indirect reference validates a book as Scripture, of the 24 books in the Hebrew canon, only Song of Songs is not used as a Scriptural reference either directly or indirectly in the New Testament. (Not all of the 'Minor' Prophets are individually represented, but the Jews considered them all as one book.)

** Paul quotes Greek poets or writers in his speech to the Athenians in Acts 17:28, and in his epistles twice: 1 Corinthians 15:33 and Titus 1:12. Jude also refers to two non-canonical works, "The Assumption of Moses" (Jude 1:9) and "Enoch" (Jude 1:14-15). Also, Hebrews 11:35 is often considered to refer to events described in the apocryphal book of 2 Maccabees (we'll talk about this in the next lesson). In none of these cases are the writings themselves presented or described as Scripture, as inspired, or as canonical.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Find examples of a believer using the Old Testament to teach others about Jesus and his ministry. Would it be possible for us to do the same

thing? In what basic ways should we expect to use the Old Testament differently from the New? What is its importance to Christians?

Overview Of The Old Testament Canon

The ancient Jews used the same books that are in our Old Testament, though they arranged them differently. We shall make an overview of the Scriptures as they existed in ancient Israel, noting the ways it was organized and used. Although most of this information is primarily historical, it can help us to understand where the Old Testament came from.

The ancient Israelites considered that their Scriptures were a record of their history and of the promises made by God regarding their history*. The ancient Bible was thus arranged in three parts, referred to by Jews over many centuries as the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings.

* Note that, by and large, the ancient Jews often misunderstood and misused their Scriptures. Thus their way of interpreting and applying Scripture, while interesting, is often not a good model for us to follow.

The Law (or the Torah, or the Pentateuch) contains the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The original formation of this unit is described in, for example, Deuteronomy 31:24-29, when Moses collected together all of his writings into a book to be preserved for future generations. This is significant in demonstrating two things that are fundamental to the entire Bible: the awareness of its divine origins, and the awareness that it contains teachings important to future generations, not just to their original hearers.

The early Christians and the ancient Jews all accepted Moses as the author of these five books. Jesus himself referred to Moses' authorship (see if you can find where). Only in recent times have alternative theories, such as the "documentary hypothesis", which suggests they were compiled from several different authors with independent agendas, found favor. Moses did not, of course, personally witness the events of Genesis, but rather assembled earlier writings and oral traditions under the spirit's guidance. Otherwise, almost everything in the Law could be attested to by Moses personally. The account of his death (in Deuteronomy 34) could of course have been added by a later editor, without in any way compromising Moses' authorship.

The Old Testament has numerous examples of the respect and special position accorded to the Law of Moses. It is also known from extra-biblical sources that the Torah or Pentateuch reached its final form by the fifth century BC at the very latest, and probably much earlier. Neither the Jews nor the Samaritans ever doubted its authenticity or its divine authority.

The next section was called the "Prophets". The 'Former Prophets' were Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings; the 'Latter Prophets' were Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and "The Twelve", which contained the twelve 'minor' prophets in one book. In this conception, a prophet can be either predictive or interpretive. Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings were generally believed to present Israel's history in light of the promises and warnings frequently made to them, indicating that things would go well when they were faithful and badly when they were unfaithful*. The books of the Latter Prophets, and also Daniel (included by the Jews in the third section, as discussed below) are the ones that Christians generally refer to as prophetic books.

* Because this principle is most fully elaborated in Deuteronomy - see particularly Deuteronomy chapters 28-30 - the books in this group are sometimes called "deuteronomic histories". Notice also that the ancient Jews usually misunderstood the implications of these promises, just as many Christians do today. (We've discussed this at greater length in a number of other classes.)

The last section of the Hebrew Bible was the Writings, or the Sacred Writings (Hagiographa). Sometimes it was simply called the Psalms, since Psalms was the longest of these books. There were eleven books in this section. First were the books of "wisdom literature", that is, the lyrical or poetic books: Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ruth (sometimes placed before Psalms), Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, and Lamentations. There were sometimes minor variations in the order of these books. Finally came the primarily historical books of Daniel (which Christians usually consider a prophetic book), Esther, Ezra-Nehemiah (one book), and Chronicles.

All of the books had been written by 400 BC*, and the Old Testament canon was arranged like this by 165 BC at the latest (see above). The final arrangement began with creation, and climaxed with the return from Babylonian exile. This explains the four books that occupy the climactic position. Chronicles, in particular, in essence contains a history of the Jews from Adam to the return, and so it was considered fitting that it occupy the place at the end**.

* Malachi, the last book in our editions of the Old Testament, was probably also the last one to be written. It was most likely written in approximately 430 BC.

** This explains, for example, Jesus' comment in Matthew 23:35 - he is not referring to the author of the prophetic book Zechariah, but to the martyr Zechariah in 2 Chronicles 24, who in the Bible of Jesus' day would have been the last martyr mentioned by name.

The ancient Jews usually counted 24 books, rather than our 39, but the material is the same. The difference comes from: (i) counting the 12 'minor' prophets as one book, probably because they could conveniently fit together on one scroll; (ii) counting Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles as one book each, and (iii) counting Ezra and Nehemiah as one continuous book. Because the Hebrew alphabet contained 22 letters, there were sometimes efforts to make the number of books match, usually by making Ruth a preface to the Psalms and by moving Lamentations to become an appendix to Jeremiah. But most editions counted the Scriptures as 24 books.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Can we learn anything from the ways in which the ancient Jews arranged the Scriptures? Does the authorship of these books matter? What role does faith play in accepting the Old Testament? Do the origins of the Old Testament tell us anything about how we ought to use it?

The Acceptance Of The Old Testament Canon

Given that the books of the Old Testament existed well before the time of Christ, the next question becomes whether these inspired books were accepted as such at the time. We shall just trace a brief history of the Old Testament canon, as it was viewed by the ancient Jews up to and slightly beyond the time of Christ. From our perspective, this is the period of most importance.

Until about 200 BC, the only exception to the universal acceptance of these books was by the ancient Samaritans, who accepted only the five books of Moses as canonical*. In the mainstream Jewish community, questions about canonicity were limited to several side matters, most of them connected with the books in the last section of the canon.

* The Samaritan Pentateuch is a version of the Law in a slightly different form of Hebrew. While it differs in some minor details, in general it is another piece of evidence to confirm the ancient teachings of the Law. The Samaritans also had their own targums of the Law, written in their dialect of Aramaic.

Rabbinical disputes in the late inter-testamental period and the early- to mid-1st century AD show that there was a small section of Jewish teachers who raised questions about four of the books in the Writings: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, and Esther. Esther caused some

concern to these rabbis solely because it did not contain the name of God. Ecclesiastes contains many statements that seemed inappropriate to some of the rabbis (indeed, it must be studied carefully in context to avoid misunderstandings). Song of Songs raised questions because it was so different from the other books. It is harder to tell why anyone questioned Proverbs. This may simply have had to do with its multiple authorship and its eclectic material.

Later in the 1st century AD, a group of rabbis also raised a few questions about the book of Ezekiel, which had long stood unquestioned. Their objections were based on the odd nature of some of Ezekiel's visions, and on the fact that the worship instructions in the last several chapters sometimes seem at first glance to differ in some respects with commands given in the Law. But neither these concerns nor the questions about the Writings ever became widespread.

This same era saw the rise to prominence of several Jewish sects with their own eccentric views on Scripture. The Sadducees accepted only the Law of Moses as canonical. This skepticism is a natural consequence of their general rejection of spiritual reality. While the Sadducees held a share of political power under the Romans, they never had any significant popularity. Their long-term influence was negligible, and their views on the canon largely ignored. The ascetic sect of the Essenes* is sometimes erroneously used as "evidence" for the acceptance of some apocryphal books as canonical. While the Essenes were keenly interested in all works of Jewish literature, they never accepted the apocryphal books as being equal to the Scriptures.

* The Essenes eagerly anticipated God's final judgment on the world. They were devoted to studying and preserving the Scriptures, and it was a group of Essenes who preserved what we call the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Essenes also had an interest in apocalyptic literature, and studied many books outside of the Scriptures.

The growing number of such discussions throughout the 1st century eventually led to a Synod being called at Jamnia (or Yavne) in AD 90. The discussions there completely upheld the standard canon, then in general acceptance for at least 250 years. There was no significant dissent from this consensus, and indeed, some commentators hint that most of the questions about the canon may well have been mere intellectual exercises, rather than genuine desires to change the canon. It is important to understand that this council did not actually decide what was in the canon. It simply called together the leading Jewish teachers of the day, with the result that they mutually confirmed what had long been accepted and believed by God's people.

In the Old Testament, we have the same teachings that our brothers and sisters in the 1st century church read. We have the same books that the ancient Israelites read for encouragement and strength in times of oppression or discouragement. "These were all commended for their faith, yet none of the them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us, so that only together with us would they be made perfect" (Hebrews 11:39-40).

For Discussion or Study: Is it important for us to show that the ancient Jews believed these books to be inspired by God? (That is, why is it not enough just to show that they existed?) What difference can it make in our own study when we remember that these same writings were also read and trusted by God's people many centuries in the past? What role does faith play in regard to these topics?

- *Mark Garner, September 2009*, © 2009 by Mark Garner

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**THE LIVING WORD OF GOD:
APPRECIATING, TRUSTING, & USING THE SCRIPTURES**

Notes For Week Four: The OT Canon - Septuagint & Apocrypha

This week, we shall look at two topics of particular significance in the study of the Old Testament canon. The Septuagint, or ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, is the version of the Old Testament that was used by the early Christians (both Jews and Gentiles). The Apocrypha is a collection of ancient works that some denominations consider to be canonical.

Review

An overview of the origin and usage of Scripture includes Inspiration, Preservation, Translation, Interpretation, and Application. So far, we have focused mostly on the inspiration of Scripture: what this implies, the reasons to believe that the Bible was divinely inspired, and so forth. Our Old Testament canon (books accepted as inspired) is the same set of writings considered canonical by the ancient Jews before the time of Jesus. The Old Testament is important as a witness to Jesus, and also as the foundation of Christianity and the forgiveness of sins. These books are known to have existed well before the time of Christ through the evidence of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Septuagint (see below), the targums, and other sources of historical evidence.

The ancient Hebrew Scriptures were arranged in three sections: the Law, the Prophets, and the (Sacred) Writings. The order of the books and the way they were counted were different from Christian practice, but the material was the same. Until the first century BC, all of these books were accepted by Jews of all backgrounds and beliefs, with the exception of the Samaritans. Then a series of rabbinical disputes brought a few books into question, and the formation of sects like the Sadducees (who accepted only the Law Of Moses) produced more divergent views. At the Council of Jamnia in AD 90, the conventional Jewish canon was once again re-affirmed.

The Septuagint (Readings in Acts 8 & Acts 17)

The Septuagint is an ancient Greek version of the Old Testament that was compiled in Egypt during the inter-testamental period. It is significant to our study in several different respects, and in fact a study of the Septuagint ties together several other aspects of our study. Both its history and its contents help us better to understand how our own Bible reached its final form.

The early Christians, both Jews and Gentiles, frequently used the Old Testament. For example, when Philip meets the Ethiopian eunuch, sees him reading Isaiah, and asks, "do you understand what you are reading?" (Acts 8:30-35), Philip then uses Isaiah to teach the gospel. Our Old Testament was the only written Scripture available to the earliest Christians. The Hebrew language was not widely spoken in the 1st century AD*; but both Jews and Gentiles in Roman territory commonly spoke Greek, so the Septuagint enabled both to study the Hebrew Scriptures.

* Most Jews in the 1st century AD spoke Aramaic, not Hebrew. Hebrew was then an academic language; and it remained a 'dead' language for many centuries, until it was deliberately revived in the 20th century.

Early believers also relied on the Old Testament in seeking the truth about Jesus and the gospel (Acts 17:2-3 and 17:10-11). In the well-known verse about the Bereans, note that they did not so much look to verify facts, but to clarify whether the gospel of Jesus fulfilled the promises God had made, and whether the teachings of the gospel were consistent with the spiritual principles taught in the Old Testament. Again, they would have been using the Greek language Septuagint.

In a sense, the Septuagint arose out of the relationship between Alexander the Great* and the Jews. When Alexander founded the great city of Alexandria in 331 BC), his favorable attitude towards the Jews helped to foster a large and strong Jewish community in the new city.

* Alexander himself is the object of the vision of the ram and the goat in Daniel 8. Written not long before the fall of Babylon, this vision looked ahead to the time when Medo-Persia (the ram with two horns) would rule that part of the world, only then to be overthrown by Greece and Alexander (the goat with the prominent horn). When this happened, the Jews passed from Persian rule to Greek rule. Then, when Alexander died suddenly, his kingdom was divided up among his successors (verse 8). The Jews in Egypt became subject to the Ptolemy line, while the Jews in Palestine came under the rule of the Seleucids.

The Egyptian Ptolemies continued Alexander's favorable treatment, and many Jews living in Egypt gladly adapted to Greek culture*. In the 3rd century BC, Ptolemy II Philadelphus asked the leaders of the Jewish community to translate the important Jewish writings into Greek, so that Greeks and Egyptians could study them. The king assembled a committee combining knowledge of Greek and Hebrew, though the details of these arrangements are now uncertain.

* Jews who accepted much of the Greek culture and lifestyle were called Hellenistic (that is, Grecian) Jews. Other Jews, especially those who remained in their original homeland, resisted the influence of Greek culture. The different opinions on this subject led eventually to the formation of the Pharisees and Sadducees, and caused something of a division in the Jewish community as a whole. This division is reflected, for example, in the difficulties described in Acts 6:1.

The name Septuagint comes from the Greek word for 70, since this panel contained 70 members (some sources say 72). The Septuagint is often referred to as "LXX" in references and footnotes. While the methods of translation were not always literal, they were very successful in making a readable version that soon became widely popular. It probably took quite some time for the entire Septuagint to be compiled and published*. The entire work was completed by about 100 BC, and most or all of it was probably completed well before that. The Greek translation of the Law is known to have been the first part completed, which should be no surprise.

* There is an old legend that it was completed in 72 days, but this is fanciful, as are some of the other legends that later arose regarding the Septuagint and its production.

The Septuagint is significant in establishing the antiquity of the Old Testament canon, but its usage in the early church is even more significant. While the Septuagint would later be replaced in the Jewish community by a different Greek edition, in the early church the Septuagint quickly became the standard version of the Old Testament. Many Scriptures show that the early Christians used it extensively in teaching the gospel of Jesus. (It is an interesting exercise to see how much about Jesus you could teach someone, using only the Old Testament.)

New Testament quotes from the Septuagint version often differ from the same passage in the Old Testament itself, because of differences introduced by translation*. Many dozens of quotes in the New Testament are based on the Septuagint reading, rather than the original Hebrew**. Yet only on rare occasions do the different wordings actually introduce a possible different meaning.

*There are also times when the New Testament writers quote from the Septuagint, and the quote agrees completely anyway, since in those cases the translation process did not introduce any variations.

** Here are a few examples to illustrate the kinds of differences that occur: Mark 4:12/Isaiah 6:9, Mark 7:6-7/Isaiah 29:13, Romans 3:4/Psalm 51:4, Romans 3:13a/Psalm 5:9b, Romans 3:14/Psalm 10:7. In these examples, and in the vast majority of other such examples, there are observable differences in the wording of these passages, but the meaning of the passage is exactly the same.

One such example, which caused controversy between the early church and the first century Jews, is Isaiah 7:14, which is quoted in Matthew 1:23 using the Septuagint reading of "virgin". The Hebrew word could mean either "virgin" or "young woman" depending on context, and English versions of the Old Testament vary in their choice in Isaiah, since either choice could be possible. But the Septuagint translators deliberately chose "virgin", and this was the reading quoted by Matthew, making it the only correct way to translate Matthew 1:23.

The main point of this is to keep in mind that if you should encounter a passage in the New Testament that quotes the Old Testament in a way that differs somewhat from the original passage, it is most likely that this has occurred because the New Testament writer is quoting from the Septuagint. These are not, therefore, errors in any sense of the word, and in most cases the meaning is not changed in any significant way.

Another interesting, if secondary, side-effect of the Septuagint was its influence on the order of the books of the Old Testament. Rather than following the then-standard arrangement of Law, Prophets, and Writings, they followed a somewhat different pattern, which established the arrangement of the Old Testament that we still use - with a few minor changes that have occurred along the way* - today.

* For example, the books of Samuel and Kings were for a time called 1 Kings, 2 Kings, 3 Kings, and 4 Kings, or sometimes 1, 2, 3, and 4 Kingdoms.

Also, as the translators proceeded with their work, they chose to translate into Greek not only the canonical books of Hebrew Scripture, but also some other works that were widely read, but not considered canonical or inspired. This was in keeping with the royal commission to compile and collect literary works of importance to the Jews. But from the viewpoint of later generations, it led to some confusion in confirming the canon of the Old Testament. In particular, this led to the questions surrounding the collection of writings known as the Apocrypha.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Are there any concerns arising from the knowledge that the early Christians used a Greek translation of the Old Testament, not the Hebrew originals? Study some of the ways that the early Christians used the Old Testament. In what ways is it important for us today? How can we help one another better to understand the meaning and importance of the Old Testament?

The Apocrypha

So far, we have considered some reasons to accept the 39 books of our Old Testament as having been inspired by God. There are equally important questions as to whether there are other writings that ought to have been included. In this respect, the most important issues concern a group of books that are generally called the Apocrypha, that is, books that were "hidden away".

Historically, the Apocrypha first gained prominence from inclusion in the Septuagint. But there was also a legend created to explain their appearance. According to the legend (which is told in the apocryphal book of 2 Esdras), during the return from exile, Ezra the scribe was told by God to proclaim and read the 24-book canon of Hebrew Scripture, but to preserve in secret 70 other books for future use. From this legend comes the name "Apocrypha", which means "hidden away". The various books included in one or another collection of Old Testament apocryphal books are thus said to come from among these 70 (not nearly all of which have been "found").

Questions about the Apocrypha are among the most commonly asked of all questions regarding the canon. While the apocryphal books vary greatly in style, accuracy, and literary quality, they share some general characteristics. All were written during the inter-testamental period, a time when the Jewish nation understood that divine revelation had temporarily ceased, pending the coming of the Messiah. All are found in complete form in Greek only, and most were written originally in Greek, although a couple of them may have originally been written in Hebrew. None were ever accepted by the Jews as canonical, although some were valued for other reasons.

Of these apocryphal books, seven are included in the Old Testament in Roman Catholic versions of the Bible, so that their Bibles have 46 books in the Old Testament, rather than 39. Those versions also have additions to two other books, Daniel and Esther. The Roman church does acknowledge that these books are late additions to their canon, calling them "deuterocanonical" books, indicating that they hold a secondary place in the canon, of a lesser stature than the rest of the Old Testament. Yet they still consider them completely valid for teaching and doctrine.

These apocryphal books include two historical works, called 1 & 2 Maccabees. The Maccabees, headed by Judas Maccabeus, were the family who led the fight for Jewish independence in the mid-2nd century BC. The book of 1 Maccabees, while not genuinely inspired by God, is nevertheless a valuable and accurate source of history from this era. 2 Maccabees is not a sequel, but a parallel history, and it is of far inferior quality, adding speculation and superstition into the narrative. For example, one passage in 2 Maccabees became the justification for the practice of saying prayers for the dead in order to improve their standing with God.

Two of the apocryphal books can best be described as religious fiction. The book of Tobit follows the adventures of its hero Tobit and his friends. The story is designed to encourage obedient living, and it features numerous angels and demons, along with plenty of bizarre and fanciful events*. The book of Judith tells the story of a young Jewish woman who saved her city from destruction at the hands of the pagan general Holofernes, by working her way into his favor and then cutting off his head. The story is entertaining in its way, and it enjoyed great popularity for many centuries, even reflected in works of art and the like. But the book is complete fiction, and it is particularly marred by numerous basic historical inaccuracies and errors**.

* For example, on an angel's recommendation, Tobit carries around a fish liver to ward off demons.

** For example, several times it refers to Nebuchadnezzar as the king of the Assyrians.

The apocryphal additions to the canonical books of Esther and Daniel are also religious fiction. In Esther, the fact that God's name is never directly used caused some concern to the ancient Jews. The additions (rather bland in themselves) were a way of adding frequent uses of God's name, to head off anxieties and doubts. The additions to Daniel are much different. One short passage ("Song of the Three Children") is a prayer of Daniel's three friends in the furnace (chapter 3), but the other two add fanciful events not in keeping with the nature of the book. These entirely fictional stories, called "Susanna" and "Bel and the Dragon" show Daniel playing detective and foiling bad guys*. Neither of these stories has significant spiritual content, and neither "case" would have provided much of a challenge to Sherlock Holmes or Jane Marple.

*The Susanna story, in which Daniel protects the life of a beautiful young woman, acquired great popularity and, like the story of Judith and Holofernes, has often attracted attention from artists and writers.

The final three books are similar in nature to the wisdom literature or poetical books of the Old Testament. Two books, Ecclesiasticus (also called Sirach, Sira, or "The Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach") and Wisdom (or "The Wisdom of Solomon") are modeled after Proverbs, though written

much later. The book of Wisdom primarily attacks idolatry. While uneven overall, some of the material in these books is of good quality and interesting to read. The book of Baruch is a meditation on the confession of sin and the promise of restoration, which purports to have been written by Jeremiah's scribe Baruch. It was actually written, though, at a much later date.

There are also other works from the same era, not included in the modern Catholic Bible, that are included by certain Eastern Orthodox denominations. Some come from the Septuagint, and some from other sources. Some of these works include 1 & 2 Esdras*, Prayer of Manasseh**, 3 & 4 Maccabees***, and Psalm 151. Three of these books (1 and 2 Esdras, and Prayer of Manasseh) had been included in the medieval Catholic Bible****.

* These are sometimes called 3 and 4 Esdras, because Ezra and Nehemiah are sometimes called 1 and 2 Esdras. Esdras is just the Greek name for Ezra. The apocryphal 1 Esdras is a variant of Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah. The apocryphal 2 Esdras is a series of visions supposedly given to Ezra (Esdras), and it contains the legend of Ezra and the 'hiding away' of the apocryphal books.

** Supposedly the prayer of repentance of the wicked king Manasseh (2 Chronicles 33:11-13).

*** 3 Maccabees contains narratives of other events from the inter-testamental period, but not involving Judas or his family. 4 Maccabees describes a series of martyrdoms from the Maccabean period.

**** There is also a book of Enoch, which, though not inspired, is referenced in Jude verses 14-15. Enoch was considered canonical by the ancient Ethiopian church (only), and survives today only in that language. Enoch and a few other works of its era are classed as "Pseudoepigrapha", rather than part of the Apocrypha.

There are several reasons why all these works are excluded from the canon of inspired books, but the most important is that they were never accepted as canonical by the ancient Jews*. There is no evidence that the Jews ever considered them canonical, and there are a number of witnesses** from the era just after the Septuagint to demonstrate that they were not included in the canon.

* Their inclusion in the Septuagint is simply a reflection of the commission given to the Jewish community in Alexandria, as well as their Hellenistic outlook. Indeed, there are books in the Septuagint that the Roman Catholic Church considers not to be canonical in any way, indicating that they too realize that inclusion in the Septuagint is not sufficient grounds for canonicity.

** The historian Josephus, for example, knew of the apocryphal books and used some material from them in his own writings, but he excludes them in his discussions of the canon.

An important secondary reason for their exclusion is that none of these works exists in a complete Hebrew original. Indeed, most of them were written originally in Greek. There do exist fragments or portions of a couple of these works in Hebrew, and it is very possible that some of the others were originally written in Hebrew, but without any manuscripts it would not be possible to reconstruct an autograph, and they thus could not be included in any Hebrew canon.

Then also, the New Testament does not attest to the canonicity of these books. The New Testament quotes frequently from almost all of the canonical books, but never refers to any passage of an apocryphal book as Scripture. Some have made lists of supposed references to the apocryphal books, but when studied, these are merely similarities of expression, not close parallels and certainly not direct quotes. The single genuine reference is Hebrews 11:35, which probably refers to events described in 2 Maccabees 6:18-7:42. Yet this is only a reference to the events, not a direct quote verifying 2 Maccabees as canonical Scripture. The lack of direct New Testament references to the Apocrypha is even more significant because the writers generally used the Septuagint, which included the Apocrypha, for their Old Testament quotes. While they had the apocryphal books readily available, they understood that they were not canonical.

Some books of the Apocrypha could also be excluded on the basis of their uneven literary or historical quality, although it should be remembered that this is not the most important criterion. Some of the stories are of laughable quality for something supposedly inspired by God, and some of the errors are excruciatingly obvious to anyone familiar with the period. While 1 Maccabees, for example, is of good literary and historical quality, many others fail by this test alone.

It can also prove helpful to have a brief historical overview of the acceptance or non-acceptance of the Apocrypha. The early church's use of the Septuagint resulted in the Apocrypha being as familiar to Christians as were the canonical writings, but there was a clear consensus that the apocryphal books were not canonical or inspired. But over time, this distinction began to blur, so that by the 4th century AD leaders of the church held different opinions on the subject.

When the great Bible student Jerome of Bethlehem (AD 347-420) was asked to make a definitive translation of the Scriptures into Latin, he was also asked to determine whether the Apocrypha should be included. Jerome's research led him to conclude - for reasons largely the same as given above - that they were not canonical or inspired. Jerome, in fact standardized the term "apocryphal". He considered them generally useful to read, but excluded them from the Bible. Ironically, despite the fact that Jerome's translation (the Latin Vulgate) was the standard version used for centuries in the Roman church, his decision on the Apocrypha was overruled by other church leaders, and thus they were included in the Latin Bible - and thus later in Roman Catholic Bibles as well. They were, however, classed as "deuterocanonical", as noted above.

There the issue rested for most of the Middle Ages. In the Reformation era, the Apocrypha was a point of contention between the reformers and the established church. The Catholic Church discussed the books at the Council of Trent in 1546. The Council affirmed the inclusion of most of the Apocrypha, but excluded 1 Esdras, 2 Esdras, and Prayer of Manasseh, which had been in their Bible all through the Middle Ages. Translators and publishers in the 1500's and 1600's had to decide* whether or not to include the remaining apocryphal books. Today, Bibles designed for non-Catholic audiences exclude the Apocrypha. Catholic versions, of course, include them.

* For example, when the King James Bible was created in the early 1600's, the translators did translate the Apocrypha into English - but by decree of the Archbishop of Canterbury, it was made a crime for printers to include the Apocrypha in printed versions.

For Discussion or Study: Why must some works be excluded from the canon if they do not meet certain criteria? What role should historical evidence play? In what ways can the Scriptures themselves help us to determine the canon? Are there any ways in which knowing the standards of the canon can be of help in your own study of the Bible?

For Further Study

If you want to read the apocryphal books, the best way is to get a version of the Bible that includes them, so that you can compare them with canonical books from the same translation. The Apocrypha are always included in those versions of the Bible primarily used by Roman Catholics, such as the modern New American Bible (note: not the New American Standard), the Jerusalem Bible/New Jerusalem Bible, and the older Rheims or Douay-Rheims Bible. Some versions of the Bible are available with or without the Apocrypha: the Revised Standard, New Revised Standard, and the Good News Bible (also called Today's English Version).

- Mark Garner, October 2009, © 2009 by Mark Garner

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THE LIVING WORD OF GOD: APPRECIATING, TRUSTING, & USING THE SCRIPTURES

Notes For Week Five: Learning From The Old Testament

The early Christians, both Jews and Gentiles, appreciated the importance of the Old Testament and its teachings. Even today, an understanding of the Old Testament can make a big difference in our perceptions of the gospel. Although there are many passages in the Hebrew Scriptures that at first seem strange or confusing, a few basic ideas can help us get much more from them.

Review

An overview of the origin and usage of Scripture includes inspiration, preservation, translation, interpretation, and application. So far, we have focused mostly on the inspiration of Scripture.

Our Old Testament is the set of writings considered canonical in ancient Israel, and is important as a witness to Jesus' promised ministry. The Hebrew Scriptures have three sections: the Law, the Prophets, and the (Sacred) Writings. Until 200 or 100 BC, the canon was accepted by all of the Jews except the Samaritans. After a series of rabbinical disputes and challenges from sects like the Sadducees, the Council of Jamnia in AD 90 re-affirmed the familiar Jewish canon.

The Septuagint is an ancient Greek version of the Old Testament that was compiled in Egypt during the inter-testamental period. In the 3rd century BC, Ptolemy II Philadelphus asked the leaders of the Jewish community to translate the important Jewish writings into Greek, so that Greeks and Egyptians could study them. The whole work was finished by about 100 BC; and the early Christians - both Jews and Gentiles - made extensive use of the Septuagint.

The Septuagint also included some non-canonical works that came to be called the Apocrypha, or "hidden" books. Because some groups desired to include some of these in the canon, a legend was created: according to it, God told Ezra the scribe to preserve in secret 70 unknown books for future use. Seven of these are included in the Old Testament in Roman Catholic versions of the Bible, so that their Old Testament has 46 books, not 39. Those versions also add some passages to two other books, Daniel and Esther. The Roman church does acknowledge these books as later additions, calling them "deuterocanonical", indicating that they hold a secondary place.

The main reason why these works are excluded from the canon is that the ancient Jews never accepted them as canonical. An important secondary reason for their exclusion is that none of these works exists in a complete Hebrew original. Then also, the New Testament does not attest to the canonicity of any of these books, as it does to most of the inspired Old Testament writings.

Obstacles To Understanding The Old Testament

There are several kinds of common passages in the Old Testament that often confuse or even discourage Christians. Sometimes unbelievers will reference these passages when giving the reasons that they do not accept the Scriptures. Before we can help others to develop confidence, we must at least acknowledge that there are some legitimate questions that can be asked.

For example, the Old Testament contains numerous lengthy genealogies, lists of names or locations, and other such "boring" passages. The book of 1 Chronicles begins with several chapters of genealogy, with numerous names and little explanatory text. Several chapters of the book of Joshua give exhaustive descriptions of the specific locations and boundaries involved in

dividing Canaan amongst the tribes of Israel. Numbers 33 contains a long list of the obscure locations that the Israelites visited during their wanderings in the desert. Even casual readers of the Old Testament will frequently encounter many more such examples.

It is entirely reasonable to ask what the point of such passages may be. Although such passages are generally not essential to an understanding of the Bible, they always have some purpose. The Chronicles genealogies, for example, remind us of all the generations and families that passed along the knowledge of God and his promises. These names remind us of all the actual human beings, believing and unbelieving, who went before us - and who will come after us. To all of these persons who lived long ago, no earthly concern matters anymore. Someday you and I also shall belong to the distant past - let us live so that what we have now will still matter then.

Similar to these examples are the lists of laws. There are laws about sacrifices, laws about money, laws about eating, laws about laws, and much else besides. Since we know that the Old Covenant is no longer in force, are all these laws just a relic of times long ago? Do they simply reflect the human culture of the time? Are they merely the practical wisdom that those who lived 'back then' needed? Or are these laws even that? Are they simply a test of obedience, with little importance for their own sake? In fact they are none of these things, as we shall discuss below.

Perhaps no feature of the Old Testament causes more honest confusion than its many accounts of killing and violence. Some violent incidents can be explained by the fact that they are simply honest representations of the uglier aspects of human nature, recorded truthfully without any implication that God approved of them*. Indeed, it is one of the Bible's most important features that it presents the truth as it really is, even about its most popular and important characters.

* David, for example, was frequently guilty of violence and cruelty, most notoriously when he ordered the death of the faithful Uriah so that he could take Uriah's wife. We should not defend such actions. Another well-known example is the account of Jephthah and his daughter in Judges 11:30-40. We do not need to look for a 'loophole', as some commentators have tried to do. Jephthah's vow was foolish, and God did not insist he honor it - it was Jephthah's own misguided idea that murder was preferable to breaking a vow.

Yet many killings, in battle or by execution, were not only condoned by God but were even ordered by God. The mass slaughter of the Canaanites* is one example that is often referenced by those who deny the validity of the Bible. Is this kind of violence an illustration of what God is like? We have to be ready to admit that in some way it must be, and it does no good simply to assume that there must have been a very good reason why the victims 'deserved it'.

* Indeed, God rebuked the Israelites when they did not carry out this instruction to completion.

This is a perfectly legitimate question; and even if we don't care about helping those who ask honest questions, we ought to realize that an inability to explain this side of God means that we ourselves do not understand some important aspects of his character. Indeed, it does reflect who God is, but in a sense entirely different than what both believers and unbelievers usually think, as we shall discuss below.

An important key to understanding the Old Testament is to remember that it consists of shadows, while the New Testament consists of realities. Hebrews 8:7-13, for example, emphasizes that the Old Covenant was obsolete already long before Jesus came - it was never intended to provide a permanent basis for our relationship with God. The spiritual principles of God's nature, human sin, the ineffectiveness of works salvation, the centrality of grace, and many more such themes are identical throughout the Bible. In the Old Testament, they appear in shadow form.

Everything important in the Old Testament remains important in the New, but it finds a more complete, more perfect fulfillment, usually spiritual and eternal instead of earthly and physical.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What Old Testament passages do you find confusing or unsettling? Do you know passages that other persons find troublesome? In what ways could these passages be important to an understanding of God? What kinds of principle might help to explain them? (See also below.)

Important Basic Ideas In The Old Testament (Readings In Genesis & Leviticus)

Although the Old Testament is large and complex, a great deal of it is based on a few all-important concepts. These ideas in turn can be difficult fully to understand; yet even a basic appreciation of them can help a lot of things in the Old Testament become clearer. Thus they also help us better understand the foundations of the gospel.

In the beginning, when God created our universe and everything in it, the Scriptures tell us that humanity was a special part of his Creation (Genesis 1-2). While everything that God created was good, he describes the Creation with humanity included as very good (compare 1:31 with previous verses in the chapter). This is simply because humans were created in God's image - not necessarily his physical image, but with many of the same aspects of God's own character.

The first human was given the breath of life (2:7)*, emphasizing the personal connection between God and humanity. Woman also was created in a more personal, direct fashion than the rest of the universe. Before sin damaged their relationships, man and woman were both able to live closely together with God (2:15-25). God's presence was a reality and a blessing.

* See also the notes for Week Two for the parallel with Scripture itself being God-breathed.

But separation occurs once the humans sin (Genesis 3). Although there are other consequences of their sin, the most significant punishment Adam and Eve receive is to be driven from God's presence*. For the most part, the other ill-effects of their mistake are inevitable consequences of being forced out of God's presence, and of no longer having the same closeness and intimacy with God. For example, one secondary effect is the new strain in the relationship between the man and the woman. Human relationships cannot be fully healthy without God's presence.

* Note also the precaution in verse 24 to prevent the humans from coming to the tree of life while in their sinful condition. God's reason (verse 22) is not fear for his authority, nor is it a desire to punish. It is simply not possible to allow the sinful into God's eternal presence (represented by the tree of life).

God simply cannot have fellowship with sin; nor can his presence remain where there is the guilt of sin. This is not an arbitrary choice by God; it is inherent in his nature and in his character. This explains many of the ways that God deals with humans in the Old Testament. This also lies behind the elaborate system of worship and sacrifice that is familiar from the book of Leviticus.

God wants to be with us*, but we are stained by sin. So, in the Old Testament, he maintained a limited presence amongst his people, symbolized by the tabernacle (and later the temple), in which the Ark of the Covenant represented God's direct presence. Because of that, the Most Holy Place had to be strictly guarded, and numerous sacrifices had to be made in order to allow even that much contact between God's presence and the sinful humans he loved.

* We typically use the phrase "relationship with God". This phrase is not used in Scripture (except in a negative sense in Romans 2), but it is fine if we remember what it means. God does not seek the same

level of relationship with us that we have with one another. The Scripture speaks instead of God's presence, which is more-or-less what we mean (or should mean) by our "relationship" with him.

The key spiritual principles involved are summarized in the charge to the Levitical priests in Leviticus 10:10. The distinctions between holy and common, and between clean and unclean, are fundamental to the Levitical ministry, and also to our relationship with God under the New Covenant. Since we have discussed these in other classes, we shall just review them briefly.

Anything in our world either is holy, belonging to God and not to this world, or else it is common. Anything common is, in turn, either clean or unclean. As believers, we generally desire to be clean, but we often fail to appreciate what it means to be holy, to be set apart from this world and belong entirely to God. Note that holiness, in this sense, is not a matter of degree; nor does it depend on performance of any kind. We are offered holiness by God's grace; and we accept it, if we choose to, by grace, not by superior knowledge or attainment.

Cleanness is the normal ('default') state of most things. To be clean before God is to be pure, complete, sinless, whole. Cleanness does not imply merit; it is an absence: of uncleanness or of damage (physical or spiritual). Although it is the normal state of things, it is unstable, for it takes only a moment for something to become unclean. To become clean again, it must be cleansed.

One principle that follows from these basic ideas is that the unclean cannot be in the presence of the holy without dreadful consequences. In the Old Testament, this has resulted in some incidents that often baffle readers of the Bible* (see also below). But also in the New Covenant we ought to consider the implications. Now, we should certainly remember that these spiritual concepts are alien to the flesh, so that we should resist any temptation to oversimplify them. And we absolutely must not use or analyze them forensically with human logic. Yet the concepts of clean, unclean, holy, and common can help explain quite a few things.

* Consider, how these ideas might explain passages such as Leviticus 10:1-2, 2 Samuel 6:7, and others.

God's presence is also linked with God's promises; indeed, his presence is his greatest promise, as he said to Abraham, "I am your shield, your very great reward" (Genesis 15:1). To live in God's presence, then, ought to be our primary aim and desire (whether we use that terminology, or whether instead we refer to it as our relationship with God). These basic principles are eternal truths that explain much that happens in both the Old Testament and in the New.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Is there a difference between God's presence and having a relationship with him? Does the terminology matter, or our understanding, or both? Can God be present without physical effects? How does the Scriptural concept of cleanness differ from the everyday ways in which we use the word? How can we better understand the concepts of cleanness and holiness as they are used in Scripture?

Re-Examining Difficult Passages

If we keep in mind general principles such as God's presence, the difference between cleanness and uncleanness, and the like, then we can re-examine difficult passages to see if they become any clearer. We still must not expect God's teachings to conform to our fleshly concepts of 'logic' or 'justice'. Yet it is certainly reasonable to hope to understand any of God's teachings.

We can use the ideas above to reconsider the laws and sacrifices. To live in God's presence, we must be free of sin and uncleanness. Even then, he cannot have the closeness he desires with us, unless we are made holy. Thus the many sacrifices and laws were necessities - imperfect, but

required; "Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them, although the law required them to be made" (Hebrews 10:8).

Therefore the laws are much more than practical guidance, and their purpose is much more profound than a mere test of faith or test of obedience. The many animal sacrifices were imperfect, providing only limited atonement. The once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus has cleansed believers in Christ of their sins once-for-all, so that God can live directly in our hearts (through the Holy Spirit), instead of restricting his presence on earth to one carefully guarded location.

Even apparently unrelated laws can be shadows of Jesus. Sometimes they are safeguards against the unclean coming into contact with the holy; sometimes they are reminders that believers are a holy, set-apart people; sometimes the reason is harder to find - but there is always something there that goes beyond trivialities such as a 'practical' purpose* or a 'test of obedience'.

* One well-known example concerns the dietary laws (such as those in Leviticus 11). In our society, it is often wrongly assumed that these laws prohibited foods that were unsafe at the time, and that the restrictions were removed later when cooking techniques were perfected. It is noteworthy that neither the ancient Jews nor the early Christians believed such a thing, which merely reflects our own cultural preoccupations. It is not hard to find counter-examples: clean (permitted) foods that were and still are hazardous to eat if prepared improperly, and unclean (prohibited) foods that were safe, even long ago. The main reason for the dietary laws was to remind the Israelites that they were God's people, and as such their lives needed to reflect it. They needed to show judgment and caution that others would not have to exercise, because with holiness - and with living in God's presence - comes responsibility, not privilege.

We can even gain a better understanding of many violent events. Often they are a case of holiness meeting sin. In this case, it is not an arbitrary decision on God's part to strike someone dead or to order someone's execution. The Canaanites, for example, widely practiced enormously violent and immoral actions, even in their 'religion'. But God did not order the Israelites to kill them as a direct punishment - rather, because God wanted to maintain his presence in Canaan with his people, he needed to rid the land of this uncleanness. This does not make their deaths any less shocking, but it does teach us some essential lessons about God.

From our perspective, this should emphasize the true nature of sin. Living by grace must not become an excuse for winking at sin. When we look at the slaughtered Canaanites, we see what happens to the sinful in God's direct presence. Only when we truly grasp and accept the loathsomeness and the eternal peril of sin can we truly appreciate the depths of God's grace.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Consider some of the Old Testament passages that confuse you or others (or some of the examples above). Can the ideas of holy, common, clean, and unclean explain any of them? How can they help us better to understand God?

Bibliographical Note

Many commentaries on Hebrews cover these topics. See also the notes to our class on Hebrews in 2006, and/or the notes to our class on Leviticus in 1999. Norman Geisler's *A Popular Survey Of The Old Testament* is largely geared to helping Christians see the relevance and importance of Old Testament study. It keeps things on a rather basic level, and can be a good starting point in studying how the various books of the Old Testament are significant in Christianity.

- *Mark Garner, October 2009, © 2009 by Mark Garner*

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THE LIVING WORD OF GOD: APPRECIATING, TRUSTING, & USING THE SCRIPTURES

Notes For Week Six: Origins Of The New Testament Canon

Unlike the Old Testament writings, the New Testament books were all written within a short time-frame; and they were all written by the apostles or by those close to the apostles. Thus the questions involved when we study the New Testament canon are different from those we considered regarding the Old Testament. We shall begin by surveying the origins of these books.

Origins Of The New Testament Books

Using the historical facts contained in the New Testament itself, plus the large number of ancient writings by and about the early Christians, it is possible to put together a fairly complete picture of how and when these books were first written. This overview will also help us to understand the reasons why these particular books (and only them) came to be seen as inspired by God.

The primary condition for inclusion was apostolic origin - each book has a direct link to someone in the small group who spent time with Jesus (or, as with Paul, who was visited personally by Jesus). It was generally understood that passages such as John 14:25-26 and John 16:13 implied the apostles' ability to follow the Spirit's teaching in some of their writings, amongst other things.

Because an apostolic source is so important in the New Testament canon, questions of authorship assume much greater importance than they do for Old Testament books*. The only significant question** along these lines is the authorship of Hebrews. There is also some uncertainty about the epistle of James, which is usually understood to have been written by the physical brother of Jesus, but which a handful of commentators think was written by James the brother of John.

* For example, the human authors of Kings and Chronicles have never been definitely known, but the ancient Jews never considered this a problem, as they did not consider authorship *per se* to be crucial.

** We shall deal only briefly with the speculations of modern 'scholars' who claim that many of the New Testament books were not really written by the apostles, but were concocted much later by church authorities. There is ample evidence to show that all of these books were widely read in the 1st and 2nd centuries, and no one ever suggested otherwise until quite recently in history. See also below.

On the other hand, apostolic authorship was not in itself sufficient grounds for inclusion in the canon. Paul, for example, wrote other letters (such as the additional letters to Corinth that he refers to in 1 and 2 Corinthians) that are not included in the collection of inspired books.

The four gospels, or personalized narratives of Jesus' life, were just as important to the early Christians as they are to us. Rather than being straightforward biographies or histories, they are accounts of Jesus as Son of Man and Son of God, written with the primary purpose of helping those who read them to develop faith in Jesus. Two of them, Matthew and John, were written by apostles who were with Jesus throughout his ministry, and who could rely on their personal experience for a great many of the things they wrote about.

Matthew nowhere identifies himself, even narrating his call by Jesus in the third person (Matthew 9:9-13), but it was universally understood by the early Christians that he was the author. It is usually thought that Matthew's account was written with a primarily Jewish audience in mind. Notice that Matthew never misses the chance to show how even 'religious' persons can completely misunderstand Jesus. John's account is much different from the other

three, and is much more personal, befitting the author called "the disciple whom Jesus loved". John identifies himself with this term, and also gives some valuable insight into his perspective in writing the book (John 19:34-35, 20:30-31, 21:20-25). Much of the material that is found in John and not in the other gospels emphasizes the ways that Jesus affected those who met him.

Mark and Luke share some obvious similarities with Matthew, and the three books are often called the "Synoptic Gospels", an indication that they are similar to each other but different from John. Mark's streamlined narrative is much shorter than the others, concentrating more on action than on teaching*. Partly for this reason, it is often assumed that Mark's work was written with Roman audiences especially in mind. Mark is known to have worked closely with first Barnabas and then Peter, establishing his apostolic link (*e.g.* see Acts 15:37-39, 1 Peter 5:13).

* For example, there are only a handful of the parables in Mark, compared with Matthew and Luke.

Luke had been with Paul on many of Paul's missionary trips. Luke wrote his gospel not from first-hand experience, but through a careful investigation that was guided by the Spirit (Luke 1:1-4). Luke's account is usually thought to have been written for a primarily Greek audience.

In the first two decades of the church of Christ, these writings were not circulated in the written form that we use now. It was considered even more valuable to have the living apostles as eyewitnesses to the life and ministry of Jesus. Three of the four gospels were written around the same time, shortly after AD 60. Matthew's gospel was first circulated in the east, and Mark's book was first published in Rome, in about AD 60. Luke probably published his account about the same time, as his sequel, the book of Acts, ends in AD 62 (and thus was probably written about that time). The gospel of John was written much later in the first century.

The order of the four gospels in our Bibles corresponds to the order in which the early Christians believed the books to have been written, although many modern researchers have felt that Mark may have actually been written before Matthew*. Since Mark wrote in Rome, where the church at that time was not yet particularly influential, his book may have taken longer to become known and circulated widely.

* There is a popular but wholly speculative theory claiming that none of the first three gospels were truly original works, but that they were all based on an earlier, now lost document (which they sometimes call by the title of "The 'Q' Document", or other such fanciful names). There is really no evidence at all for this, except for the preconception that divine inspiration is not possible. The close parallels in events and phrases used in these three accounts should not be surprising, since they were based on the same facts, and since each writer probably made use of widely circulated oral teachings. Until very recently in history, no one ever suggested that the four gospels were not produced by four separate writers.

There are a couple of reasons why there are four different accounts of many of the same events. Parallel accounts often indicate the importance of the material, and the life and ministry of Jesus are without equal in terms of their importance to Christians. The inclusion both of eyewitnesses and of independent researchers also adds additional validity to the story. Finally (see above) each gospel does have a particular perspective that might make it especially valuable to a particular audience. The 1st century church accepted all of these as inspired, and by the middle of the 2nd century AD, the expression "the four gospels" was already in common use.

The book of Acts was originally a sequel to Luke's gospel account. Acts ends about AD 62, and was probably published shortly after that time. Originally, it was the usual practice to circulate Luke and Acts as a two-volume set with the title "History of Christian Origins", of which parts one and two were the books of Luke and Acts, respectively. In the late first century, the practice

first began of grouping the four gospels together*, and thus the second part of the "History of Christian Origins" was given the new title of "The Acts of the Apostles", which it still has.

* The practice of circulating the New Testament as a unit had not yet begun. Although the earliest Christians understood that all of the books in the New Testament were inspired, they usually read and distributed the books as individual scrolls. See also the last section of the notes, below.

The 21 epistles form the most numerous group of writings in the New Testament, and Paul wrote more of them than did any of the other authors. Because of the extensive information about Paul's ministry in the book of Acts, along with references to secular leaders and events, it is possible to pinpoint a likely date and location for many of his letters. Paul encountered initial difficulty winning acceptance after his conversion from persecutor to Christian, but he soon became recognized as one of the church's most devoted missionaries. Peter shows (2 Peter 3:15-16) that Paul's inspired letters were accepted as Scripture in his own lifetime. Here is a reconstructed chronology of some generally accepted approximate dates for Paul's letters and major mission activities (note that most of these are approximate, within a year or so):

36-46	Paul's Ministry in Judea, Syria, & Cilicia; the church at Antioch established
46-48	Paul's First Missionary Journey (Acts 13:2-14:28)
50	Meeting in Jerusalem to discuss circumcision and the law (Acts 15)
50-52	Paul's Second Missionary Journey (Acts 15:40-18:22)
51 or 52	The two letters to the Thessalonians written after Paul was driven from the city
54-58	Paul's Third Missionary Journey (Acts 18:23-21:16)
57	1 & 2 Corinthians written; Galatians probably written near this time also
57 or 58	Romans written during Paul's return trip to Corinth
58-60	Paul arrested in Jerusalem, imprisoned in Caesarea, taken to Rome (Acts 21:17-28:30)
60-62	Imprisoned in Rome - writes Philippians, Colossians, Ephesians, & Philemon

A chronology of the latter part of Paul's life cannot be established beyond doubt, but some key historical events, along with statements made in his later epistles, make the following chronology likely (though variant versions have also been suggested):

62 or 63	Paul released to continue his ministry; may have gone to Spain
64*	Great fire in Rome, followed by short but brutal persecution of Christians
65	Paul writes 1 Timothy and Titus
65, 66, or 67	Paul re-arrested in the persecution; writes 2 Timothy, soon afterwards is executed
68*	Nero overthrown as emperor
70*	Jerusalem besieged and destroyed by the Romans

* These are some of the events from secular history that are used to establish New Testament chronology.

The epistles of James, Peter, John, and Jude are usually called the "General Epistles"*, because (except for the short letters 2 & 3 John), they were written to a general audience, rather than being addressed to a particular congregation. Peter** and John were apostles, while James*** and Jude were the physical brothers of Jesus, and accorded similar status by the early Christians. James the brother of Jesus was also for some time one of the most respected figures in the early church, and he played an important part in resolving the difficult issues discussed in Acts 15.

* Occasionally they are called the "Catholic Epistles" - the word catholic simply meaning 'universal'.

** 2 Peter is a favorite target of skeptics, who claim that it was written at a later date, and given Peter's name to make it seem legitimate. This relies on highly speculative assumptions about technical details.

*** A small number of commentators think that James may have been written instead by James the apostle, the brother of John. If this were true, then James would have been the first of all New Testament books to be written, since this James was executed by Herod Agrippa I in AD 44. But most of the evidence suggests that the more common theory is correct, namely that it was written by the physical (half-)brother of Jesus.

The letters of James, Peter, and Jude were all probably written in the time period between AD 60 and AD 70. The three epistles of John have no definite date, but were most likely written later, possibly around AD 90.

In between the General Epistles and the epistles of Paul, there is Hebrews, the only New Testament book whose author is unknown. In the early church, the letter was assumed to have been written either by Paul or by one of Paul's associates*, giving it an apostolic source. But by the second century, it was already considered uncertain who had written it, and by the middle of the third century, the writer and commentator Origen confirms that no one knows who wrote the letter. Modern scholars have applied their techniques, and many have convinced themselves that they have solved the mystery**, but since they all disagree with one another, it seems clear that they have not. The authorship is important insofar as it would have to carry apostolic authority, at least indirectly, and the 1st century church accepted that without reservation.

* The original recipients knew who wrote it. A common theory is that the title plate on the original scroll fell off, a not uncommon occurrence that has led to uncertain authorship for many non-biblical works of antiquity. The fact that the author does not identify himself in the text is, in itself, not at all uncommon.

** For a good summary of the entire discussion, see F.F. Bruce's commentary, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*.

The New Testament concludes with Revelation. Biographical details in chapter 1 show that it was written about AD 95. In it, John describes the visions God gave him while John was exiled on Patmos. While the book's style is different from the rest of the New Testament, its authorship and its emphatic affirmation of the ultimate triumph of Jesus Christ not only confirm its canonicity, but also make it a fitting conclusion to the New Testament's story of victory in Jesus.

For Discussion or Study: How can it help us in our study when we have an idea of the origins of the books of the New Testament? How do these different parts of the New Testament fit together? Should apostolic origin carry so much significance?

The New Testament Canon In The First Century AD

By the year AD 100, all of the books of the New Testament had been written, and most of them had been widely read and accepted as divinely inspired by the early Christians. But it was not yet the norm for these writings to be collected or circulated as a unit. Since many things were different in the first century, we shall survey a few ideas that will help to explain later events.

In the earliest years of the New Testament church of Christ, there was no written New Testament Scripture. During the era when most of the apostles were living, they served as an important foundation for the church's teaching. Before the New Testament books were written, there were three important sources of truth that filled the role that the New Testament would play later.

As long as the apostles lived, they were eyewitnesses to the things Jesus had said and done, and also to his private instructions and promises. They could testify that they personally saw Jesus after he was raised from the dead. Besides the apostles, there were also the miracles, which closely resembled the miracles Jesus himself had done. Both are mentioned in passages like Hebrews 2:1-5, which tells us that the message was confirmed to believers by those who heard the Lord's teachings, and that it was also confirmed by God through miracles and other gifts of the Spirit. Finally, of course, the early Christians had the Old Testament Scriptures, which served as a vital source of prophecies and promises about Jesus and his ministry.

The New Testament began to be written soon after AD 50, when Paul began to write his letters. During the 60's AD, much more of the New Testament was written: Three of the gospels, Acts, the rest of Paul's epistles, Hebrews, and the General epistles, except for John's letters. The apostle John wrote most of his books in the 90's, completing the collection. Most of these books were at once universally accepted as inspired by the Christians of the era.

Even in the New Testament, we see indications that Scriptures already written had been accepted as inspired. One significant example is found in 2 Peter 3:15-16, where Peter, most probably writing while Paul was still alive, describes Paul's letters as Scripture. Then, in 1 Timothy 5:18, Paul uses the phrase "Scripture says" to refer to two quotes, one from Deuteronomy and one from the gospel of Luke, which had been written only a few years earlier.

The honor given to these new Scriptures is also revealed in the practice of public reading, which remained a prominent feature of the early church even after the believers had ready private access to the Scriptures. In passages such as 1 Thessalonians 5:27 and Colossians 4:16, Paul refers to this practice, which was already becoming common. The early Christians understood that the Scriptures themselves carried far more weight and authority than any other teachings.

Examples from other writers also demonstrate that, by the end of the century, Christians were familiar with and accepted as Scripture most or all of the New Testament books. Clement of Rome, writing in the decade of the 90's, directly quotes from Matthew, Luke, Hebrews, Romans, and Corinthians, and refers at least indirectly to many other New Testament writings. (Note that most of John's writings were just being written about this same time.)

Ignatius of Antioch, who early in the 2nd century wrote a series of epistles to various churches, quoted frequently from the gospels and from Paul's letters. Ignatius usually does not refer to these explicitly as Scripture, but he assumes that their contents will carry weight with his readers; and he makes clear in his letters that nothing he himself writes or says is on the same level as the teachings and writings of the apostles. Other writers throughout the 2nd century also quote from the New Testament books and refer to them as inspired.

For Discussion or Study: While cannot know all of God's plans, can we see any aspects of his plans in revealing the New Testament Scriptures in the time and way that he did? Should it be important to know that the early Christians accepted these particular writings as being inspired by God? Is it their judgment that matters, or something else?

After The First Century – Part One

As the apostles and other first-generation Christians passed from the scene, the written Scriptures gained an even greater importance. For several decades, the New Testament canon was universally understood (amongst believers), but never 'officially' defined. Several factors led to the practice of publishing the New Testament books as a unit, instead of individually.

An interesting historical development that has a connection with the Scriptures is an advance in the production of books. For centuries, the scroll had been the standard way of writing and preserving significant books, but the 1st century AD saw the introduction of the codex, or side-to-side binding of pages that we still use. The early Christians were among the very first to see the advantages of this format, which made it possible to publish much longer works in one volume. For example, the practice of publishing the four gospels as one unit, which became common in the late first century, was made possible by the codex form of publication. Eventually this would make it possible to publish the entire New Testament in one book.

There were several stages in the process by which the New Testament canon came to be defined explicitly. By the early second century, all the books were written and in circulation, and there was an unstated but widespread unity regarding the inspired writings produced and/or authorized by the apostles. While there were occasional questions about some of the shorter, lesser-known books, there were no challenges to the canon until AD 140, when problems caused by the false teacher Marcion necessitated for the first time that the canon be defined more formally.

This Marcion attracted a widespread following, and caused a major division in the church, despite that fact that his teachings* were eccentric and in many ways contrary to the New Testament. Marcion accepted only Paul as a legitimate teacher of Christian doctrine, and he thus rejected many books of the New Testament. He published for his followers his own version of the canon, which included only an edited version of Luke plus a collection of Paul's letters. This, the first open claim to identify the list of inspired books in a way other than that generally accepted, forced the rest of the church to respond. In Rome, where Marcion was teaching, the church began to make a point of teaching what constituted the canon, and churches in other areas soon followed their example in making the list of books a formal teaching.

* For more detail on Marcion and his teachings, see almost any history of the early church.

At least one important document shows how the early church responded to Marcion and others who would distort the canon. This document, called the Muratorian** canon, was written in Rome in the last half of the 2nd century, and it gives a detailed description of the list of inspired apostolic works, with comments on many of them. It omits only four of the shorter books. It also specifically mentions a non-inspired but popular book of the era, "The Shepherd", by Hermas, and describes it as a worthwhile but still non-canonical work. The document also mentions some other non-canonical works that were apparently more familiar to the Roman Christians than they were in other regions.

** It has this name because Cardinal Muratori discovered and published the manuscript in the 1700's.

Ironically, then, someone who rejected the accepted canon was the one who first caused it to be formalized. Over the next three centuries, as the church of Christ underwent many changes, a number of questions about the canon came to light. We shall continue with these next time.

For Discussion or Study: Of what use is it to know the historical background of the New Testament canon? Can we see God at work? Why did it take a false teacher to spur others to make the canon 'official'? Should it have been done sooner?

Bibliographical Note

See the sources given earlier, including Merrill C. Tenney's *New Testament Survey*. Most books about the history of the early church also contain a summary of the development of the canon. Some recommended church histories include: Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*; Tim Dowley (editor), *Introduction to the History of Christianity* (also published as *Eerdman's Handbook to the History of Christianity*); and Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*. The last two cover many centuries of church history, not just the era of the early church.

- Mark Garner, October 2009, © 2009 by Mark Garner

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THE LIVING WORD OF GOD: APPRECIATING, TRUSTING, & USING THE SCRIPTURES

Notes For Week Seven: Acceptance & Use Of The New Testament In The Early Church

Although the earliest Christians accepted the writings of the New Testament as inspired by God, in later years there were controversies and discussions about several of its books. Meanwhile, as the church itself changed over the years, there were also changes in the ways that Scripture was commonly used. Our historical survey this week picks up in the 2nd century AD.

Review Of Last Week's Topics

The books accepted as the New Testament were reliably attributed to apostolic sources. The four gospels have been seen as a unit since the early 2nd century. Matthew, Mark, and Luke contain similar material, written for somewhat different audiences. Acts was originally titled "History Of Christian Origins, Part Two", until it was separated from Luke in the early 2nd century. The epistles of Paul were written at various times in his ministry, beginning with his letters to the Thessalonians during his 2nd missionary journey. The "General Epistles" (those between Hebrews and Revelation) were written in the 60's, except for John's epistles, which were written in the 90's. Hebrews is a special case, since the author is not now known, which led to questions about its canonicity (see below). Revelation, the last book written, fittingly closes the Bible.

In the first century AD, Christians accepted the New Testament canon without controversy. While the apostles were alive, their eyewitness testimony, the miracles, and the Old Testament Scriptures more than made up for the lack of a written gospel. Contemporary acceptance of the writings in the canon is shown through internal examples (such as Peter calling Paul's epistles "Scriptures"), and from external writings by Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch*, and others.

* Ignatius was a bishop (elder) of the church of Antioch, whose activities angered Roman authorities. He was sentenced to be taken to Rome and killed there in the infamous arena games. On the lengthy journey to Rome (AD 108), he won the friendship of the soldiers guarding him, who allowed him many freedoms, including the right to send and receive letters along the way. Ignatius thus spent much of the journey writing letters to churches and friends in many of the cities along their route to Rome. See also the Bibliographical Note below.

After the passing of the apostles, the written New Testament was even more important. The spread of Scripture was greatly aided by the use of the codex (what we would call book) form of publishing. At first, only the four gospels were circulated as a group, but there was an unstated unity about most of the books considered inspired. A challenge from the false teacher Marcion (about AD 140) led to the first effort, begun by Christians in Rome, to formalize the contents of the canon. This is summarized in an ancient document known as the "Muratorian Canon".

Acceptance Of The New Testament Canon - Continued

Marcion's challenge to the accepted canon had the ironic effect of transforming an informal agreement on the canon into a more formal list of divinely-inspired writings. It also brought to light that, by the nature of divine inspiration, there could be no final human authority as to what constitutes Scripture. Over the next couple of centuries, discussions about the canon continued.

In the era after Marcion, discussions and debate about the New Testament canon became much more common. During this era, many other Christian writings became popular and widely published, but in most cases there was no question about the distinction between them and the

actual Scriptures. The writings of Irenaeus* in the late 2nd century attest to the universal acceptance of all New Testament books except for Hebrews and some of the short epistles. Tertullian**, also in the late 2nd century, was the first to use and popularize the term "New Testament" to refer to the new set of canonical books.

* Irenaeus was from Smyrna, and later became bishop (elder) of the church at Lyons in Gaul, where Gnosticism and other false teachings were popular. Two major works of Irenaeus survive.

** Tertullian was an African from Carthage, whose law practice led him to Rome. He became a Christian there, and soon decided to focus his enormous energy and dedication to spreading Christianity. Tertullian insisted that Christians should combine zeal and knowledge in equally high degrees. Late in his life, he left the mainline church because of his frustrations with what he felt was a lack of zeal and of moral standards.

There were three writings, "The Shepherd", the "Didache" (a collection of standard doctrinal teachings) and the so-called "Epistle of Barnabas", that were occasionally considered canonical by small groups of Christians; but none of them were included on any widespread basis, having no clear link to an apostolic origin. With the New Testament canon, the question of excluded books was never a significant problem or controversy in the first few centuries of the church. The questions raised in the early church concerned whether anything more should be excluded.

In the third and fourth centuries AD, several significant pieces of evidence confirm that our New Testament canon corresponds to the early church's. The 3rd century writer Origen* confirms the canon of his era, though he indicates that, again, Hebrews and some of the shorter epistles were sometimes questioned. He also discusses and comments on a number of excluded works.

* Origen, despite his numerous virtues, held many eccentric or even erroneous views. He is an invaluable source of church history, but his writings should not be considered as a reliable guide to doctrine, nor should his personal views be seen as typical of the things that all Christians of his era believed.

The history of the church written by Eusebius in the 4th century is a valuable source for the historical confirmation of the canon. He confirms that the same basic canon of our modern Bibles was in common use in his day; he discusses the history of the canon; and he talks about the books that were or had been questioned by some. Eusebius is extremely cautious and conservative, so he expresses reservations about a couple of the shorter books that others also wondered about. Eusebius thus confirms that the majority of books were never questioned, and that no books besides the familiar 27 were considered to be serious candidates for addition.

Of the 27 books in the New Testament canon, the ancient Christians immediately and always accepted as inspired and canonical 21 of them. The four gospels, Acts, the 13 letters of Paul*, 1 Peter, 1 John, and Revelation** are included in all known complete ancient versions of the canon. Hebrews was universally accepted in the 1st century, but caused some concern in the 2nd and 3rd centuries because of its uncertain authorship. By the mid-4th century, Hebrews was again no longer questioned, because the church felt that its apostolic link was satisfactorily established despite the impossibility of determining the specific human author of the book.

* Philemon, like the other very short books, was sometimes omitted from the earliest collections of the canon, but its authenticity was not doubted by those familiar with the book.

** In the 2nd and 3rd centuries, Revelation was as confusing to many Christians as it is today, and there were those who asked why it was in the canon. But there was never a serious call for its removal, just as today Christians accept it without question even though they may have great difficulty in understanding it.

In the early church, the questions most commonly asked were about James, 2 Peter, 2 John, 3 John, and Jude. In some cases, the short length of these books had caused them to be less

familiar or less widely distributed in the earliest years of Christianity, and thus to be omitted from the earliest collections of canonical works. There were also questions of authorship: for example, James could have been written by at least two different authors of that name, and John identifies himself anonymously in his epistles. In some cases, these factors led to an analysis of the books that brought up additional questions, but the actual content was a secondary issue to the main issues of authorship and apostolic legitimacy. By the middle of the 4th century, almost all Christians felt that all these books had genuine apostolic links, and that if they had been omitted earlier, it was not because those familiar with them did not accept them, but for other reasons. From that time on, the 27-book New Testament canon has been the undisputed norm.

A letter written in AD 367 by Athanasius, a leader of the church in Alexandria, provides a detailed and important summary of the canon as it was understood in his era. The letter verifies exactly the 27-book canon that we have, with no indication of any remaining doubts or questions. Athanasius also specifically refers to several other popular but non-canonical works of Christian literature, and explicitly says that they are not Scripture, though they may be worth reading for other reasons. Finally, Athanasius provides a clarification of the Old Testament canon, since he mentions several books of the Apocrypha that were popular in his era, and again he explicitly says that, though possibly useful, they are definitely not inspired Scripture.

During the 4th century AD, when Christianity suddenly went from being illegal to becoming the favored religion of the emperors, it became common for church councils to be called, gathering together leaders from across the world to discuss important issues. Unbelievers and skeptics often erroneously assume that it was at such a council that the contents of the New Testament were determined. All of the councils in the early and mid-4th century discussed issues entirely different from the canon - indeed, they simply assumed the validity of the Scriptures. Not until the Council of Hippo in AD 393 was the topic brought up at a council, and then it was only to make a formal statement of the church-wide belief that these 27 books were inspired. The same statement was included in the proceedings of a council at Carthage four years later. Thus, these councils made no decisions, and did not even investigate or debate the issue, but simply passed a resolution to acknowledge what everyone believed, but which had never been made "official". Our confidence in the inspired nature of the 27 books of the New Testament has nothing to do with church authority making it so. In fact, our confidence does not even rest on the good judgment of the ancient Christians. Rather, the historical events and writings show us God's own hand at work, as he himself revealed his truth to his people, and enabled them to see it clearly.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Is there anything in the history of the New Testament's development and acceptance that can strengthen our faith? What lessons from history might be of use in helping others to believe the teachings of the New Testament? Why did God leave some questions about the canon unanswered? How should we address such points when talking to seekers or unbelievers?

Scripture Usage In The Early Church

Even in the church, the Bible is often used in inappropriate ways. Many fruitless controversies and debates arise from the different ways in which persons choose to approach the Scriptures. The early Christians wrestled with this, too. Like us, they found how difficult it is to set aside one's own preconceptions; and like us, they often resorted to human methodologies.

It is not just a concern, but an unfortunate certainty, that false teachers will arise amidst those who believe the gospel (2 Peter 2:1-3). The gospel is so powerful that it attracts all kinds of persons, for all kinds of reasons. Although grace and humility can keep us faithful to the truth,

there are also some powerful motivations - greed, selfish ambition, and self-righteousness - that sometimes induce even those with a belief in God to exploit the gospel for their own ends.

Peter thus helps us to distinguish truth from falsehood, by emphasizing that the source of false teachings is the individuals who teach them. Their errors originated from their own desires*, not in Scripture. They teach stories not based on fact, but manufactured by their own imaginations to justify their agenda. A hallmark of false teachers is that they can find clever and superficially reasonable explanations, perhaps seemingly based on Scripture, for the things they wish to do.

* Consider also John 8:42-47. The ultimate source of false spiritual teachings is Satan, who exploits human pride, selfish ambition, and self-righteousness.

Likewise, Paul exhorts Timothy to proclaim the Word of God, without worrying about what others want to hear (2 Timothy 4:1-4). He reminds Timothy of Jesus, of Jesus' kingdom, and of Jesus' future return, for the truth is based on these unchanging things rather than on the whims and fashions of this earth. Since the worldly do not know God, they live by ever-changing moods and emotions, which they try to pass off as knowledge and insight. Thus they reject God's wisdom, and instead listen to 'experts' who will say what they want to hear.

Our society and our culture like to present themselves as unique, with the implication that they don't have to 'follow the same rules' that apply in other times or places. But human nature never changes, and the true human needs do not change. If we wish to fit into our own worldly time and place, then genuinely following Jesus won't make it easy. But if we wish to find a meaning in life that transcends time, place, and circumstance, then Jesus alone offers us this chance.

We shall now make a brief survey of the use of Scripture in the early church, and of how it changed over the first five centuries AD. There are (and always has been) a great variety of ways that Scripture has been used and interpreted, even within the New Testament church itself. But a broad overview will still help us to see some significant points.

Though there were a variety of approaches to the New Testament in the 1st and 2nd centuries, we can make some helpful generalities. A great many copies of the Scriptures were produced, beginning even before the New Testament was collected and distributed as a unit. These were copied, shared, and studied diligently, and were given a value well above any monetary worth. Emperor Diocletian (284-305), a bitter persecutor of Christians, knew this and instructed his henchmen to confiscate Bibles using threats of torture or death. Most Christians felt it highly inappropriate to surrender their Bibles, and many were outraged by those who gave in.

* In fact, the Donatist split in the early 4th century was caused by disagreements on this issue.

Most early Christians valued the Old Testament highly, but used it differently from the way they used the New. The early church generally interpreted the Old Testament in an allegorical, or at least stylized, fashion. Many writers and preachers did not attach literal truth to any but the most clearly straightforward and historical of passages. They emphasized instead references to Christ, types or shadows of New Testament teachings, and important spiritual principles and lessons. In contrast, their approach to the New Testament tended to be much more straightforward, seeking a rigorous understanding, even of its less prominent books and teachings.

Most of the early biblical interpreters did not focus on commands or rules, but instead emphasized how Scriptural teachings flowed from God's nature and from one's identity as a Christian. Early Christian writings often emphasize a new life and identity, knowledge of the Creator of the universe, and similar concepts. We have much to learn from this approach, which

ensured that specific teachings were accepted and followed not because they were "what the church taught", nor out of "duty", but because they came from God's own nature and character.

There were exceptions, especially in the second century as divisions became more common. Many of the differences came in the use of the Old Testament. Groups such as Gnostics and Millenarians (similar to contemporary pre-millennialism) pursued a much more literal study of the Old Testament, because it fit their doctrines better. Most Gnostics, in fact, reversed the trend of the mainline churches, by interpreting the Old Testament literally, and in turn allegorizing the New Testament and rejecting the literal truth of the narratives (especially those concerning Jesus himself). Even beyond the practices of these erring believers, there were, of course, also many specific passages in both Testaments that found contrasting explanations by various teachers.

Yet despite the lack of ultimate 'authority' other than Scripture itself, there was a general unity in the most important ways Scripture was used. The early believers understood that authority belonged to God, not to the church. In most cases, the early church settled differences through a careful, prayerful (and often time-consuming) look at Scripture alone. Just as important was the methodology - the approach to Scripture in the earliest generations was expository, looking at context, and seeking to adapt church practices to the Scripture, rather than the other way around.

By the 3rd century, more distinct schools of interpretation began to appear, and biblical interpretation (or exegesis) began to become more systematized. The two primary approaches were represented by Alexandria and Antioch, the two churches with the most influential groups of 'scholars'. Both approaches were expository in nature, and both emphasized the authority and wisdom of God, not of the church. But otherwise their perspectives were significantly different.

The Alexandrian approach, of which the most noted practitioner (and largely the founder) was Origen, allegorized most of Scripture, even the New Testament*. In Antioch, a more traditional center of the Eastern Church, a trend began towards interpreting all of Scripture more literally and factually, de-emphasizing not only allegorical or typological interpretations, but also de-emphasizing abstract principles in favor of factual applications**.

* Alexandria was a noted center of Greek influence, and this approach fits well with a perspective heavily influenced by Greek philosophy, especially Neo-Platonism.

** This was part of the basis for the later split between the church in the west and the church in the east.

As with so many aspects of the early church, after Constantine's accession to the throne* a great change took place in the ways that Scripture was used. In the first place, as soon as Christianity became a favored religion, many persons became Christians with no real personal commitment to the truth of the gospel, and thus many of these new "converts" had little knowledge of, or respect for, the Scriptures. They also had little motivation to study the Bible deeply or at length, and church leaders found it necessary to simplify their explanations of important teachings if they wished for these new converts to grasp them at all.

* In AD 313, Constantine became the first Christian emperor of Rome. He soon established Christianity as the official religion of the Empire. Once the church was united with the civil authority, it was transformed into a crass vehicle for political influence, financial gain, and fleshly authority. See also the notes to the summer class on the history of human religions, or notes from past classes on the history of Christianity.

Also, with the advent of the church Councils, it became necessary to insist that the church's approach to Scripture was in line with the decisions of the Councils, which were generally backed not only by the growing authority of the bishops, but by the emperor's power as well. Because of this, the proof-text approach began to replace the expository approach. Instead of

approaching Scriptures with an eye towards learning what they said, and how the church ought better to practice biblical teachings, the approach turned towards searching the Scriptures for "evidence" to support previously determined conclusions. Unfortunately, this proof-text approach is often more popular today than the more appropriate expository approach.

Writings or lessons that use a book or long passage of Scripture as a basis, and which seek primarily to expound and/or apply the Scripture (called commentaries or expositions) were more common and popular in the early church than they are today. Lessons or writings that seek instead to drive home a particular point or points, and which select an assortment of Scriptures to support the desired points, are often called homilies. Homiletic teaching can be valuable if done carefully, faithfully observing the context of each Scripture. But when done without care or objectivity, or when it becomes proof-texting, it becomes easy to go astray.

This produced a gradual but decisive shift in emphasis of how Scripture was used. The approach began to focus more and more on backing up the standard teachings of the mainline or "catholic" (universal) church. In line with the Councils, uniformity of teaching began to be considered as more important than a search for truth. Worst of all, during this period the leaders of the church gradually began to assume for all believers the job of interpreting and applying Scripture. With so many "Christians" who had little desire diligently to study and understand the Scriptures on their own, it seemed simpler and more convenient to relieve them of this "burden" entirely. This change contributed decisively to the final decline of the New Testament church.

The same patterns all too often occur today. Many believers in Jesus are happy to wait for their 'leaders' to tell them what to study, what to believe, and what to do. But many aspects of church history show that it is vitally important for each Christian to take individual responsibility for his or her spiritual health. God enables each of us to learn directly from his Word. "No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord', because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest" (Hebrews 8:11, quoting from Jeremiah 31).

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What does the New Testament itself teach about using it? What does it say about distinguishing truth from error? Is it more important to avoid false teachings or to learn the truth? To what extent is either of these even possible? What does Christian history teach about these questions?

Bibliographical Note

See earlier notes for suggested sources to study the development and acceptance of the New Testament canon. For studying the ways that Scripture was used in the early church, three good sources are: Christopher A. Hall, *Reading Scripture With The Church Fathers*; Donald K. McKim, *Historical Handbook Of Major Biblical Interpreters*; and Manlio Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation In The Early Church*.

Collections of early Christian writers such as Clement, Ignatius, Irenaeus, and many others are fairly easy to find. Penguin Classics' *Early Christian Writings* has a good selection from several writers. Penguin also has an edition of Eusebius of Caesarea's *The History Of The Church* (sometimes published as *Ecclesiastical History*), which was written in the 4th century AD.

- Mark Garner, October 2009, © 2009 by Mark Garner

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**THE LIVING WORD OF GOD:
APPRECIATING, TRUSTING, & USING THE SCRIPTURES**

Notes For Week Eight: The Preservation Of Scripture - Part One

So far, we have discussed the origins of the books of the Bible, and have considered how best to use them, without examining the process by which the original inspired writings were preserved for later generations. The process of preserving the Scriptures is of key importance, since we want to know whether the texts we read today are faithful representations of God's Words.

Review & Introduction

For several decades, the New Testament canon was informally accepted. Only in AD 140, when Marcion published a false canon, was there need for a more formal consensus. Discussions on the canon continued through the 2nd & 3rd centuries. Questions usually concerned whether one of the 27 books should be removed - only on rare occasions, in specific locations, did anyone think a new book should be included. By the 4th Century, a general consensus had been reached. Authorship questions about the 'General Epistles' had been resolved; and though the author of Hebrews remained (and remains) unknown, the 4th century Christians were convinced that the book originated from someone close to Paul. By the time that the church councils took up the canon, the consensus was so complete that the councils only made a brief statement ratifying the common viewpoint. In the Middle Ages, the New Testament canon remained unchallenged.

As we proceed to new topics, remember that demonstrating the validity of the Scriptures is not the same as proving a theorem in mathematics or pure logic. Nor is it the same as performing a science experiment that could immediately prove or disprove a theory. There is no one single line of argument that clinches the case. We must find many pieces of evidence that, taken together, eliminate reasonable doubt about the Scriptures. The 'proofs' we must use are similar to those we would use to verify facts from history, not facts from mathematics or science.

For example, how would you prove that George Washington was our first President? You could find books that say so, but any individual reference could be mistaken. There are contemporary witnesses, but no living eyewitnesses. There are paintings of George Washington, but no photographs. Any one piece of evidence could be fake or simply mistaken. But taken together, the evidence proves the facts to any reasonable person. The same is true of a great many facts that everyone accepts as true, despite the lack of any one piece of evidence that clinches the case.

This is even truer with facts and events of antiquity. There is little hard evidence to prove many well-known facts about the ancient world. For example, almost all we know about Socrates comes from two writers, Plato and Xenophon, who were his devoted followers, not objective witnesses. Yet no one rationally denies the facts about Socrates' life, or any of thousands of other ancient persons or events. It is only when one comes to the Bible, with its spiritually challenging teachings, that skeptics and unbelievers suddenly resort to a much different standard of proof.

There is really an element of faith in almost anything we believe or "know" to be true, whether we realize it or not. In seeking spiritual reality, God has done many things to give us evidence of who he is, but he also wants us to combine these evidences with our own faith.

Another side of this is seen in 1 Corinthians 1:26-31, when Paul exhorts the Corinthians to trust in God's nature, not in human wisdom or achievement. God will not, and does not have to, accommodate human standards of truth or justice. Anyone who seeks the truth must instead look

for God's truth and God's justice, which are often at odds with the standards that humans create. Human standards of logic and fairness are arbitrary, created to serve our own agendas. But God's truth and God's justice flow naturally and inevitably from his own nature and character.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Do any ideas we discussed about the inspiration of Scripture also apply to the ways God has preserved the Scriptures? What kinds of proof or evidence should we look for? How might we see God's character in these areas?

Survey Of Ancient Writing Materials

The physical materials used both for the original autographs and for the manuscript copies of the books of the Bible were simply ordinary, everyday materials that were used for other writings in the ancient world. Just as God uses ordinary human beings to carry out his purposes, so also he has relied on ordinary writing methods and materials to preserve his written word.

Writing and writing materials have probably been an essential part of human culture for longer than history itself can determine*. Paper writing materials from ancient Egypt date back to at least 3000 BC. In the Bible, Moses is the first person who is described as doing writing (see, for example, Exodus 17:14, 24:4, 34:27-28, Numbers 33:2, and Deuteronomy 31:9, 31:22, 31:24). In fact, although writing certainly existed before Moses, Moses is one of the first specific individuals in all of history to be credited with writing a particular work.

* The Jewish historian Josephus (1st century AD) once stated that God gave the gift of writing to humanity not long after Adam. There is also an old Jewish and Samaritan belief that Enoch was the first person to use writing. But neither of these beliefs is supported by any objective evidence.

The earliest writing materials did not resemble paper. The very earliest writings were probably inscriptions on stone or rock, as with the stone tablets given to Moses. Another biblical example is found in Job 19:24 (Job is also one of the oldest books of the Bible). Such inscriptions were long-lasting, but because of their nature they were usually used for monuments or other writings meant for a fixed location, or for writings of which only one copy was necessary. Clay tablets were more commonly used, as they had some noticeable advantages. Clay is easier to write on in its soft form, and it was very common to write in clay with a stylus, producing wedge-shaped characters that are usually called cuneiform*. After the clay was baked, the writing became fixed and permanent. This process, though, presented its own inconveniences of size and weight.

* From "cuneus", the Latin word for wedge.

A less common writing surface was wood, less durable than rock or clay, but lighter. (There is, again, a biblical example in Ezekiel 37:15.) Wax tablets, pliable like soft clay but not so heavy, were often used for temporary notes or everyday communications, since wax had little durability but was easily re-usable. Another common material was potsherds or "ostraca*" - small pieces of broken pottery - which were used in many places for short, everyday communications.

* This is, in fact, the origin of the English word 'ostracize'. In Athens, there was a large urn in which citizens could place a potsherd, or ostraca, with the name of an Athenian citizen whom they believed should be ejected from the city. (The Athenians would then vote on the names submitted.)

Despite the alternatives, paper and ink writing materials were long ago found to be the best all-around option for writing anything more than a short note. Paper products are not as durable as some other materials, but they have obvious advantages in convenience and economy. The most ancient form of "paper" was papyrus, which was being used in Egypt at least 5000 years ago.

Papyrus is a reedy plant that grows along marshes and rivers. Its stem contains a pith that can be pulled out in fairly sizable flat strips. These strips were laid on top of each other in a criss-cross pattern, to provide strength, and then glued or gummed together. A number of such sheets were then attached to each other to produce a longer sheet, which could be wound into a scroll. Besides Egypt, another common source of the papyrus plant was an ancient town in Phoenicia called Gebal*, which the Greeks called Byblos. From this town, the Greeks developed the words "biblos" (βιβλος) and "biblion" (βιβλίον) which both meant "book" or "scroll". From the latter word, we eventually got our word "Bible", from the medieval Latin word Biblia, which in turn came from the Greek plural of "biblion".

* This town is mentioned in Psalm 83:7 and Ezekiel 27:9; and its inhabitants, the Gebalites, are mentioned in Joshua 13:5 and 1 Kings 5:18. The town still exists, and is called Jubayl, in present-day Lebanon.

A more upscale writing material was parchment, the skin of animals that had been dried, shaved, and scraped. Calfskin parchment was called vellum. Parchment was more durable, but was rare and expensive, so it was used mostly for official documents. The biblical city of Pergamum was one of the main sources of parchment. Paul refers to some parchments among his possessions in 2 Timothy 4:13, but we do not know whether they were copies of Scripture or of something else.

Once a roll of papyrus was prepared, ink (made from one of a number of substances) would be used to write on the papyrus, usually in multiple columns. When completed, it was rolled up into a scroll. Papyrus scrolls had the grain of the reed running horizontally on one side, and vertically on the other. The horizontal side made writing much easier, so this was usually the only side used. When completed, sticks or rods were inserted at either end to make rolling and unrolling easier, and a name-plate was pasted on the outside at one end. The usual form and size of a scroll was about the size of a book like Luke or John. Scrolls much longer than this were quite cumbersome to use. Scrolls were generally stored in cylindrical cases, which were sometimes designed to accommodate a group of scrolls meant to be read or studied together.

We shall look briefly at just a few biblical examples, since writing is such an important part of God's communication with his people. We noted above 2 Timothy 4:13, in which Paul asks for his scrolls ("biblia", translated in some versions as "books") and parchments to be brought to him in prison. There are also biblical passages that use the image of a scroll. For example, in both Zechariah 5:1-4 and Revelation 5:1, a scroll with writing on both sides is used to make a point, based on the rarity of this in actual practice (that is, one would only write on both sides if it was necessary to say something both lengthy and essential without breaking it up on two scrolls). A different example is found in Jeremiah 36:21-25, when the king shows his contempt for Jeremiah's teachings by snipping apart and burning the scroll that contained them. As one more example, Jesus himself is shown using a scroll containing Scripture in Luke 4:17.

We have noted that the codex form of books came into use in the 1st century AD. A codex is a book arranged in the form with which we are familiar, with the leaves side-by-side and bound together along one edge. This process has the obvious advantage of making possible the publication of much longer volumes than it would be possible to fit on a scroll. Thus, even before the scroll completely disappeared from use, the Scriptures were being published in larger units, and soon were found in a format and arrangement very similar to that of modern Bibles.

Questions For Study Or Discussion: Why did God use only ordinary writing materials for the Scriptures? Why would it not have been more helpful to use some special material that might have preserved the originals? Look for other biblical examples that show the use of various writing materials, and see if there is anything we can learn from them.

Manuscript Evidence - Introduction

The original autographs no longer exist for any important ancient writing; so the questions that arise in reconstructing the text of the Bible also apply when studying any other work of antiquity. We shall survey the process by which books were preserved in the ancient world, and then shall look at the ways that manuscript evidence is evaluated. (This topic will continue next week.)

The preservation of books in the ancient world was already a long-standing and careful process by the time of Jesus. The general idea was simple: whenever an original work was considered important enough to preserve, hand-written copies of it would be made, with the number depending on the expected demand. When those copies began to fade or deteriorate, new copies of the copies would be made, and so forth. In many times and places, this process was an important profession in itself. It was also common for someone keenly interested in a book to write out his or her own copy from someone else's copy.

Making hand-written copies is tedious, time-consuming, and also prone to error. Over the years, many techniques were designed to improve accuracy. For example, the ancient Jews kept counts of the total numbers of words and lines in a manuscript, plus data such as the exact middle of the manuscript, in order to make it easier to check a document's accuracy. Through the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic church made book copying into a widespread and carefully organized practice. Many non-biblical works of antiquity survived largely through manuscripts made in medieval monasteries, many of which contained a scriptorium, a special room designed for the purpose. Many of the monks also developed an elaborate technique of illustration (or illumination), both for aesthetic purposes and to alleviate somewhat the tedium of the process.

There are a few special considerations when we study the preservation of the Bible, as opposed to secular works. For example, the surviving manuscripts of the New Testament are older and more numerous than those of the Old Testament, which may seem odd at first. Yet this is simply a consequence of the different perspectives that the ancient Jews and the early Christians had about their written Scriptures. The ancient Jews considered it disturbing to allow manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible to become damaged or heavily worn, and such manuscripts were ceremonially destroyed. Thus, at any given time, only the newest and most flawless manuscripts were preserved*. The early Christians did not consider the physical condition of biblical writings to be of any importance, and thus they treated any and all copies of Scripture about the same**.

* This is one reason the Dead Sea Scrolls are significant. Since they were left behind by the community that possessed them, they date from a much earlier time than previously known Old Testament manuscripts.

** Since the early Christians used the Greek-language Septuagint version of the Old Testament, their copies of the Old Testament are of much less help in reconstructing the original Hebrew text.

Another special feature of the Biblical books is the chapter and verse divisions. Although these are so familiar to us, they were never part of the original text. The idea of having a set of textual markings in order to identify a specific reading is an old one, and ancient Christians and Jews alike devised systems of doing this with the biblical writings. But the system of chapter and verse divisions that we now use dates back only into the Middle Ages.

The ancient Jews divided the Old Testament texts in a number of ways, but the system we currently use was devised by the Masoretes, a group of medieval Jewish scholars devoted to preserving the best possible text of their Scriptures*. The verse divisions they created have been used since roughly AD 900**. The chapter divisions of the Old Testament came later, and were

first developed by Christians***. They probably originated in the 13th century AD, not long after the first chapter divisions of the New Testament were used (see next paragraph).

* You will often see references to the 'Masoretic Text'. This is the version of the Hebrew originals that is based on the work of the Masoretes.

** These sometimes differ from the ones in our Bibles. For example, Hebrew Bibles usually count the superscription of a Psalm as the first verse, making many of the Psalms one verse longer in Hebrew.

*** Medieval Jews adopted chapter divisions out of necessity. Believers in Judaism, especially in Spain, were often forced to debate and defend their beliefs in front of 'Christian' authorities who persecuted them. They thus adopted the chapter references that medieval churches used for the Old Testament. Note that the chapter divisions in Hebrew Scriptures occasionally differ from the ones in our Old Testament.

With the New Testament, the process was different. The text was divided into sections (roughly the size of paragraphs) by the 4th century, but these did not correspond to present-day divisions. They long ago fell into disuse. Towards the end of the Middle Ages, several different systems of chapter divisions were invented, with the one devised by Stephen Langton in the 13th century being the one on which the present-day system is based. Verse divisions were first introduced in the late 1400's, with the current system of verse divisions dating back to about 1550*.

* The first English language Bible with complete chapter and verse divisions was the Geneva Bible, printed in 1560. We'll discuss the early English language versions of the Bible later in the quarter.

Ancient texts are reconstructed by evaluating and comparing the manuscript evidence. The ideal is to make the books on our shelves - whether they are Bibles, the works of Plato and Aristotle, or anything else - correspond as closely as possible to the now-lost original, using the available manuscripts as a guide. The better the manuscript evidence, the more confident we can be in knowing that we have something very close to the original text. Yet even with some of the most important literary works of the ancient world, sometimes the manuscript evidence is meager.

There are three keys to evaluating manuscript evidence. First, it is desirable to have as many ancient manuscripts as possible. The more there are, the more they can be compared with one another, to evaluate accuracy. Further, a lot of copies made by the same hand, or found in the same place, are not as helpful as a few copies from different places and written by different copyists. Second, the dates of the manuscripts are important. The closer they are to the time of the original, the fewer times the work was copied and recopied to get to that manuscript, and the more likely it is to be close to the original form. Finally, the consistency of the manuscripts is important. If every manuscript is the same or is similar except for insignificant details, then one can be more confident that this closely represents the original form. But if there are many variations, then it becomes less certain that the original can be established with any certainty.

Next time, we shall continue these thoughts by giving specific examples. They will show that to question the text of the Bible, in the face of the evidence, would also require questioning or rejecting practically every other book written in the ancient world.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What legitimate questions are there about the accuracy of today's Bibles? What evidence could help answer them? What might we expect to find in comparing manuscript evidence for the Bible to that of other works?

- *Mark Garner, November 2009, © 2009 by Mark Garner*

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THE LIVING WORD OF GOD: APPRECIATING, TRUSTING, & USING THE SCRIPTURES

Notes For Week Nine: Manuscript Evidence For The Scriptures

Last week, we looked at ancient writing materials and the ways that books were made in the ancient world. We shall now compare the manuscript evidence for the Scriptures with the manuscripts that are used to reconstruct and translate other important writings of antiquity. This will reassure us that the original text of the Bible can be accurately reconstructed.

Preserving The Scriptures: Review & Thematic Ideas

The written Scriptures used everyday materials that were normally used for ancient writings. The earliest writing materials were non-paper; but long ago, paper and ink were found to be the best way of writing something permanent. The papyrus plant was especially suitable. For important or official writings, parchment was more durable but more expensive. In any case, the scroll was the standard form of books until the development of the codex.

In general, the preservation of ancient texts depended on careful copying and re-copying of hand-written manuscripts. One special consideration in looking at manuscripts of biblical texts is that the chapters and verses, which often influence our impressions of a passage, were not part of the original texts; nor did they exist at all until many centuries later.

In evaluating manuscript evidence, there are three major areas. The ideal is to have numerous manuscripts from a variety of sources. Then, the dates of the manuscripts would be, ideally, as close as possible to the originals. Finally, the consistency of the manuscripts is important. Inevitably, there will be variations; but even the variants can help establish the original content.

As with so many other important aspects of his relationship with humanity, God chose to use fallible, mortal humans to proclaim and to preserve his Scriptures. This does not at all mean that God does not care about the accuracy of his Word - rather, it reminds us that those who know the truth have the responsibility of passing along God's Word from person to person and from generation to generation. One of Moses' best-remembered exhortations to the Israelites details the time and attention that God wishes them to devote to the Scriptures (Deuteronomy 6:6-8, 11:18-21). God did not make miraculous arrangements to guarantee the transmission of his written Word from one era to another, instead relying solely on the devotion of those - whether few or many - who valued it enough to make sure that future generations could know it as well*.

* Ironically, some skeptics discredit manuscript evidence for the Bible because it was produced by believers. This misses the point in several respects, but most notably, it is irrelevant. Manuscript evidence cannot prove that the Bible is divinely inspired, in any case. What it does demonstrate, to the satisfaction of anyone reasonable, is that today's Bibles preserve the original writings with a high degree of accuracy. This holds up well even against rigorous scientific analysis of the manuscript evidence.

Although Jesus came to fulfill and replace the old covenant (the Old Testament), he indicated that the words of the Old Covenant would stand forever (Matthew 5:17-18). Moreover, he foresaw that his own words - the New Covenant - would also stand forever (Matthew 24:34-35, Mark 13:30-31, Luke 21:32-33). It is indeed of crucial importance that our Scriptures faithfully represent the thoughts and words that God spoke so long ago to Moses, Paul, and the rest. If skeptics actually could throw serious doubt on the contents of our Bibles, then this would cast some doubt on the gospel itself. But it is only those who demand the unreasonable, and who cling to skepticism for skepticism's sake, who would make such a claim.

Ancient Manuscripts: Number & Variety

To establish the legitimacy of an ancient literary work, and to form an adequate basis for translation into modern languages, it is desirable to have as many manuscripts as possible. To eliminate errors and inconsistencies, it also helps to have manuscripts from different times and places. But for many texts, this has to be done from a small number of surviving manuscripts.

The best way to appreciate the manuscript evidence for the Bible is to compare it with the manuscript evidence that is used to preserve and translate the text of other important ancient books. For our examples, we shall use the Latin and Greek classics, since these include the majority of the most widely read and carefully preserved works of the time. Many of them still retain much of their importance in philosophy, history, or literature. There are also many significant ancient writings in other languages, but the manuscript evidence for them is generally much more limited than is the evidence for the Greek and Latin classics.

Those not familiar with the ancient world might be surprised to find out how little hard evidence there is to establish the existence, authenticity, and original text of even the most famous books of the Greeks and Romans. For example, among the Latin classics, Julius Caesar's *Gallic Wars* (known to any Latin student) is known from only 9 or 10 manuscripts. Livy's extensive history of Rome, *Ab Urbe Condita* ("From the Founding of the City", i.e. the history of Rome from its origins until Livy's lifetime) is known from 20 manuscripts, and it is far from complete. Some of the works of the influential historian Tacitus are known from only a single manuscript.

The numbers of manuscripts for most of the Greek classics fall in a similar range. Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War*, one of the most important ancient works of history, has survived to modern times from only 7 or 8 usable manuscripts. There are no more than 9 manuscript copies of any play by Euripides, whom many Greeks considered to be the greatest playwright of their world. There are no more than 10 manuscripts of any play by Aristophanes, a comic playwright who was immensely popular in his day (he was a contemporary of Socrates and Plato), and there are no more than 49 manuscripts of any work by the great philosopher Aristotle*.

* In fact, of the writings usually credited to Aristotle that have been preserved, most are believed to be transcripts of his classes recorded by his students. Most of Aristotle's original writings are now lost.

With rare exceptions, there are fewer than 100 manuscript copies of any important work of ancient Greece. Even some of the exceptions merely have a large number of manuscripts made at the same time and place, which lessens their value considerably. In many cases, the modern versions of these classics that we read today are based on a single digit number of manuscripts - and in a few cases a work is known from only one single manuscript. Yet no reasonable person has ever seriously suggested that these works are therefore not authentic, or that they were not written at the time when their authors actually lived. And no one has expressed serious doubts about the accepted contents of these works. Nor should they, for to do so would not be a scientific attitude, but would merely be unreasoning skepticism for skepticism's sake.

The only writer of antiquity for whom the manuscript evidence is truly abundant is Homer, whose writings were held in almost religious esteem by the Greeks*. There are 643 manuscript copies of Homer's *Iliad*, many more than exist for any other ancient work outside of the Bible - but this still falls well short of the number of manuscripts available for the New Testament.

* Homer records the Greeks' legendary victory over the Trojans, and the exploits of the great Greek heroes.

By contrast, there are over 5000 surviving manuscripts of all or part of the New Testament in the original Greek. These Greek manuscripts testify to the genuine date of the New Testament, and also form a wide base for accurate translation. There are also over 19,000 manuscripts of early translations of the NT into other languages (Latin, Ethiopic, Slavic, Armenian, Syriac, and 9 other languages). These are not usable for direct translation, but are additional evidence that the New Testament documents were indeed widely available in a relatively short time after they claim to have been written, and they are also very helpful in examining as parallel texts.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: See the end of the last section below for discussion questions that apply to this week's topics.

Ancient Manuscripts: Time Span From The Original

Original autographs no longer exist for any important book of antiquity. Both for the Bible and for other ancient works, a major question about manuscript evidence is the distance in time between the original writing and the surviving manuscripts. The less time between the autograph and a copy, the more likely it is that the copy is an accurate reading of the original text.

With one exception, there are no surviving manuscripts of the major classical Greek authors that date within 1000 years of the autograph. This includes Plato, Aristotle, Thucydides, Aristophanes, Euripides, and many more. Again, the revered Homer is the exception. There are manuscripts of some portions of the *Iliad* dating from about 500 years after it was written.

Manuscripts of the Latin classics often cut the time span below 1000 years, but in all cases the surviving manuscripts are still from dates several centuries after the originals were written. In the case of Caesar's writings, the time span is almost 1000 years, whereas with the historian Tacitus it is 900 years, and the historian Suetonius 800 years. Livy is a little better, as there is a fragment of his history that dates within 500 years of his lifetime.

Compared to all these, the NT manuscripts were written very close to the originals. The earliest complete codices of the entire New Testament date from the 4th and 5th centuries AD, with the earliest codex having been copied about 250 years after the last books were originally written. Thus, the earliest complete copy of the New Testament is much closer in time to the original than are the earliest small fragments of even the best-documented Greek and Roman books.

Further, there are numerous manuscripts of complete or nearly complete books from the 3rd century and the last part of the 2nd century - in some cases, barely 100 years after the original autograph. The earliest of all is a manuscript containing a portion of the gospel of John, which comes from the early years of the 2nd century, probably less than 20 years after the gospel was written. It could very well have been a direct copy of the original autograph. All of these short time-frames, not to mention the large numbers of manuscripts involved, make the manuscript evidence for the New Testament quite unusual amongst all the great books of antiquity.

Most comparisons here have used data on New Testament manuscripts, but before going further we should make a brief summary of the manuscript evidence for the Old Testament. Most manuscripts of the Hebrew Old Testament are from AD 900 or later, since it was the deliberate policy of the ancient Jews that when a manuscript of Scripture became damaged or worn, it was to be discarded in a special ceremony. There are many manuscripts of the Septuagint (Greek) version from the same era of the manuscripts of the New Testament, because that was the version that the early Christians used and copied for themselves. For direct translation,

manuscripts of the Septuagint are not as useful as Hebrew manuscripts would be, but they are still valuable for demonstrating authenticity and for use as a comparison with the Hebrew texts*.

* See the recommended general sources for more detailed information on Old Testament manuscripts.

One reason the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls was such a sensation was that it pushed back the date of the earliest Old Testament manuscript evidence by at least 1000 years. Further, these scrolls could be compared with the medieval Hebrew manuscripts, to see if there were significant differences. Comparisons showed that the only changes in the text were insignificant spelling differences and other very trivial changes that usually did not alter the meaning. Since then, some other older manuscripts of the Old Testament have also been found* that further help to confirm the ancient text. While the manuscript evidence for the Old Testament is not as remarkable as that for the New Testament, in terms of abundance and nearness to the original dates, it is still as good as or better than that of any other ancient work in terms of numbers and dates, and it is better than those works in the consistency and completeness of the manuscripts.

* For centuries, the practice of the Jews was that when copies of Scripture became too worn to be fit for use, they would first be retired to a special room in the synagogue called a "genizah". When a sufficient number of scrolls accumulated in a genizah, they would be permanently discarded in a special ritual. Recently, some of the genizahs have been uncovered with some manuscripts still in them, and many of these manuscripts are much older than the majority of Hebrew manuscripts that have long been known.

Ancient Manuscripts: Consistency & Completeness

The quantity and the dates of a set of manuscripts mean little if the manuscripts are not of good quality. Do the manuscripts contain the complete work, or only portions that need to be pieced together with sections from other manuscripts? Then, it is important to evaluate how consistent the manuscripts are with one another. Do they differ only in minor details, or also in content?

In the process of copying and re-copying by hand, which was essential for the preservation of ancient texts, there are several kinds of errors that can slip into a manuscript. The mere fact that the words and letters in books were handwritten (instead of printed) increased the possibility of error, such as the misreading of one letter or word for another. The tedious process of copying by hand sometimes led to words or whole lines being accidentally skipped. Some other variations were deliberate attempts to revise words that had become archaic, or to add words to clarify a now-obscure passage. Then too, because books were written as scrolls for so many centuries, large portions of a longer work could become lost, and many shorter works of antiquity, some very popular in their time, are now lost forever. Sometimes passages could become inadvertently omitted because they were at the end of a scroll, or because they were at the beginning of a scroll that continued the work. Even ancient codices that are discovered may have some of the individual pages damaged or ruined, resulting in the loss of some of the text.

As mentioned in last week's lesson, the ancients were well aware of these potential problems, and they devised many techniques to head off as many errors as possible. The ancient Jews were probably the most diligent of all in devising means of preserving the text of Scripture (see examples in last week's notes), and the group of medieval Jews known as the Masoretes brought the process of preservation to near perfection. The early Christians, likewise, were very careful in making copies of Scripture and other books, and the quality of manuscripts of the New Testament from the first four centuries of the church attest to this.

It is not uncommon for even the greatest of ancient writings to have lengthy missing portions, or for there to be entire works of even the greatest writers that are lost forever. For example, Livy's

famous history of Rome originally contained 142 books, but parts or all of only 35 can be found in the surviving manuscripts. Tacitus wrote 16 books of his *Annals*, but 4 were completely lost and two partially lost. Tacitus also wrote 14 books of his *Histories*, but only 4 1/2 survive. The Greek playwright Aristophanes (see above) wrote at least 44 plays, the titles of which can be verified through references from other ancient writings, but manuscripts of only 11 plays survive. Similar facts are true of other great Greek playwrights such as Aeschylus and Euripides.

The New Testament manuscripts are much more complete than are those of other ancient writings. Every book that has ever been listed as part of the New Testament still exists in its entirety. In a very few places, there is a legitimate question of a missing fragment and/or a late addition. Most such passages are very short, leaving little impact on the text whether they are included or not. Two rare exceptions are the last part of Mark 16 and the first part of John 8. These are included in their entirety in most manuscripts of those books, but they are not in most of the very earliest manuscripts of Mark and John. Skeptics often use this as some kind of evidence against the Bible - but the fact that there are only a couple such passages demonstrates a remarkable degree of completion and consistency, compared with other ancient books.

Manuscript evidence is also commonly used to eliminate inconsistencies in the various versions of a book. Where there are differences, there are often explanations such as those mentioned above. Where there is no clear explanation for a discrepancy, preference is generally given to the reading in the manuscripts that are the oldest and/or are of the best overall quality.

The New Testament manuscripts are far more consistent with each other than are those of other ancient writings. We can again use Homer as a comparison, since the manuscript evidence for the *Iliad* comes the closest of any ancient writing to being comparable to that of the New Testament. There are legitimate questions concerning about 40 manuscript lines of the New Testament, with a total of about 400 words involved. This constitutes about 1/2 of one percent of the New Testament, which is about 20,000 manuscript lines long. By comparison, the *Iliad* is about 3/4 as long as the New Testament, with about 15,000 manuscript lines; but there are questions, problems, or variations with over 750 lines of the *Iliad*, or about 5% of the text. This is despite the existence of almost 10 times as many New Testament manuscripts - normally the existence of more manuscripts means more variant readings, not fewer.

Questions For Discussion or Study: Why is there such extraordinary manuscript evidence for the New Testament, compared with that for other ancient books? Is this important? Why, in the face of such evidence, would skeptics still question the Bible but not other ancient books? What conclusions should we ourselves draw from this evidence? Does it prove that the Bible was divinely inspired? If not, does it prove anything useful?

Bibliographical Note

In addition to the general sources already given, there is an interesting book titled *The Complete Text of the Earliest New Testament Manuscripts*, edited by Philip W. Comfort and David P. Barrett, which gives complete details about these earliest manuscripts. There is a good, concise summary of data comparing biblical and other classical manuscripts, in terms of their quantities, dates, and so forth, in Josh McDowell's *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, Volume I, chapter 4. Many editions of the works of classical authors include details about the manuscript evidence for a particular work. See me if you would like some references for this kind of study.

- Mark Garner, November 2009, © 2009 by Mark Garner

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THE LIVING WORD OF GOD: APPRECIATING, TRUSTING, & USING THE SCRIPTURES

Notes For Week Ten: From Preservation To Translation

In the early centuries of the church of Christ, both the preservation of Scripture and the translation of Scripture were already important. Many copies of the New Testament writings were made and distributed. At the same time, as the gospel continued to spread into new areas, it was already necessary for the Scriptures to be made available in a number of other languages.

Review: Manuscript Evidence For The Scriptures

In evaluating manuscript evidence for any ancient writing, there are three main areas to consider. First, it is desirable to have many manuscripts from numerous different sources. Then, the dates of the manuscripts would be, ideally, as close as possible to the date when the original was written. Finally, the completeness and the consistency of the manuscripts are both important.

By comparing the surviving manuscripts of the New Testament with those of other ancient writings, we can show that the content of the New Testament is more reliable and complete than the content of any other ancient book. There are thousands of manuscripts of part or all of the New Testament, from many different times and places; whereas for ancient classics in general it is unusual to have as many as a hundred - and many great works of antiquity have been reconstructed from fewer than ten copies.

The same holds true in the other areas of evaluation. There are complete New Testaments dating from within 250 years of the last books being written; whereas a 500-year time span is the very shortest for any Greek or Latin classic, and over 1000 years is much more common. Every book of the New Testament has been preserved in its entirety, while large portions of works by other great ancient writers such as Livy, Aristophanes, and Tacitus have been lost forever. As far as consistency, only about ½ of one percent of the manuscript lines of the New Testament are open to legitimate questions; while even in the works of Homer, antiquity's most revered author, about 5% of the manuscript lines involve questions or discrepancies.

This manuscript evidence is not a mathematical proof that the Bible is divinely inspired. It is, rather, an emphatic demonstration that the text of the New Testament has barely changed, and only in insignificant ways, since the days of Paul and John. Whether we are believers who already trust God's Word and want to learn from it, or whether we are seekers who want to study the Bible's message to determine whether it contains divine truth, we can at the least read and study the Bible with the confidence that we have the same content that its first century readers had. To question the Bible's literary reliability or authenticity, one must set 'standards' that also reject the reliability and authenticity of everything else written in the ancient world.

Languages Of The Early Church

From the very beginning of the church, Jesus intended for the gospel to be taken to "the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Indeed, on the very first day that the gospel was publicly proclaimed, the audience included speakers of many different languages. Thus, even in the ancient church, the New Testament Scriptures were translated into, and read in, many different languages.

On the day of Pentecost, the outpouring of the Spirit upon the disciples enabled everyone in the large and diverse crowd to hear "the wonders of God in our own tongues" (Acts 2:1-11). It is no

accident that this 'first gospel sermon' was delivered to an international audience. This key aspect of God's provision of the gift of tongues is often overlooked.

Just as English and a few other languages are today known by many persons across the world who are not native speakers, so too in the 1st century AD there were some languages spoken in large areas of the world. Yet, even from the first day of the church, we can see from the list of places represented at Pentecost that there were was a wide variety of cultures and languages in the church even when its membership was mainly Jewish*. Large portions of Asia, Africa, and Europe are all represented in this crowd. From the beginning, Jesus and his Father intended the church of Christ to be multicultural and international.

* In particular, this assembly includes Jews from "Hellenized" communities that had adopted Greek cultural practices (even before becoming Christians) as well as Jews from communities that still held closely to ancient practices. Even before any Gentiles accepted the gospel, the church was multicultural.

Among the languages of the New Testament world, Greek was the one most widely spoken. By the time of Christ, the Greeks had lost their political and military power, but they were still pre-eminent in many other areas of life, and the Greek language was still the leading language of literature and philosophy. Ancient Greek had several dialects, with the most significant in literature being the dialect of the Athenians, called Attic Greek, in which many of the familiar classics were originally written.

The "Koiné" or "Common" Dialect is the language of the New Testament. This version of Greek became prominent under Philip of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great, when Philip united Greece under Macedonian rule. It combined the common features of the main dialects (although it was closer to the Athenian dialect than to any of the others), with a somewhat smaller vocabulary, and made it easier for official (and, in particular, military) communications to be understood clearly by residents from different parts of Greece, whose own dialects were different. In the 1st century AD, the Koiné dialect was commonly used throughout large parts of the Roman Empire as the language of everyday commerce and public communication.

Latin, being the language of the Romans themselves, was of course important in the first century world. Not too long after the gospel became established in Italy, Latin translations of portions of the Scriptures began to appear. But there was no standard or even reliable Latin version until the late 4th century. At that time, the leaders of the church at Rome asked Jerome of Bethlehem, the most widely known biblical scholar of his era, to carry out a full translation into Latin.

Jerome's translation, usually called the "Vulgate" (which simply means "common" or "popular"), eventually became not only the standard Latin version, but also the most influential of any version for many centuries. With the church at Rome becoming increasingly influential in the 4th century, and even more so in the Middle Ages, the Latin Vulgate soon became entrenched in the eyes of many as the official version of the Scriptures. Even the first English language versions were translated from the Latin Vulgate, rather than from the original Greek.

Another very important language in the biblical era was Aramaic, a sister language to Hebrew and the language spoken by most Jews at the time of Christ. Aramaic was widely spoken throughout the east, and it was the primary local language of many of the territories that were evangelized by the early Christians. Eastern Christians soon developed their own translation of the Bible into a form of the Aramaic language that is usually called Syriac (sometimes called Christian Aramaic). This version is named the Peshitta or "simple" version.

The Old Testament of the Peshitta was translated from the original Hebrew, and the New Testament from the original Greek. The surviving manuscripts of the Syriac Bible cannot, of course, be used for direct translation, but they often provide interesting and useful additional information about the ancient existence of the books of the Bible. Christianity has a long and interesting history in the regions to the east*, but this is beyond the scope of our present study.

* The apostle Matthew wrote his gospel from this region, and probably had his ministry there. There are also numerous legends about the apostles Thomas and Bartholomew being active in these eastern areas.

In the early centuries of the church, the Scriptures were also translated into many other languages. The Scriptures were translated into Ethiopic, the language of ancient Ethiopia, in the 4th century, along with some other non-canonical writings about God. Slavonic (or Slavic) had no written language until one was devised specifically* so that the Bible could be written in that language in about the 9th century. The Bible was translated into Armenian in about the 5th century, after the area had been evangelized by the Syriac church. The Coptic** church in Egypt also had their own translation, originating in Alexandria. The Scriptures were also translated into several other languages that were spoken in smaller nations or regions.

* Gothic is another language that had no written form until the coming of the gospel, and for which one was devised specifically so that the Scriptures could be written in it.

** Coptic is a form of ancient Egyptian. Even after Coptic ceased to be a spoken language, it remained in use as the ecclesiastical language of the Coptic Church in Egypt.

Today, of course, the Bible has been translated into more languages than any other book. This is not a new phenomenon, because it has always been God's will for his Word to be proclaimed everywhere, to the ends of the earth. For the believer, it can bring great encouragement to realize the many places and languages in which the gospel was proclaimed. We are united not only with believers across the world today, but also with faithful followers of Jesus from the distant past. Some of these ancient Christians praised God in languages that no longer exist.

To the skeptic, the literary evidence cannot by itself prove that Christianity is the truth, but it does demonstrate that Christianity and the New Testament were never the product of human institutions or authoritarian leaders. It was not until well into the 4th century AD that church councils, imperial authorities, and other such parasites became involved.

By that time, the Scriptures had already been so widely copied, translated, and distributed that even the most powerful human authorities could not make any significant alterations to the Word of God. All of the evidence needed to verify the canon and the contents of the New Testament was already in existence while the church was still a loosely-organized fellowship of persecuted 'outlaws' scattered across three continents.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: What implications are there to the presence of an international audience in Acts 2? Look up some of the places listed. What differences might there have been amongst travelers from these places? What is the significance of the many languages into which the New Testament was translated in early church history? Is there any significant trend in the major versions in Greek, Latin, and Syriac? If so, what significance could it have?

Preserving Scripture In The Early Church

We have noted that the manuscript evidence for the New Testament is much more abundant and much more reliable than the evidence for any other ancient book. This is even more noteworthy

in view of the considerable efforts on the part of Roman authorities to suppress the Scriptures. Most other books, subjected to the same degree of hostility, would have been lost completely.

A complete study of the manuscripts of the New Testament would take much more time than we have, but it can be useful to know about a few of the most significant manuscripts. Manuscripts are classified according to several criteria, such as the material they were written on (that is, papyrus or parchment) and the kind of writing* that was used. These and other similar criteria are also used to help determine the dates when the manuscripts were originally written.

* The two usual styles are uncial, written in all capitals, and minuscule, which used smaller letters.

There are three key codices of the entire Bible that are usually considered to be the most important manuscripts, as evidence for the text and for translation purposes. The oldest complete codex is called the Codex Sinaiticus*. This is a parchment copy of the entire Bible in Greek (that is, including the Old Testament is the Septuagint version) written down in the 4th century. The other two best-known early codices also have the entire Bible in Greek: the Codex Alexandrinus**, a 5th century manuscript, and the Codex Vaticanus, another 4th century manuscript that is now in the Vatican Library. Another early codex, the parchment Codex Ephraemi from the 5th century, is incomplete because some of the writing had been rubbed off, but most of the text has been recovered.

* It was found in a monastery on Mount Sinai. It is currently in the British Museum.

** Originally from Alexandria, it also is now in the British Museum.

There are many other significant manuscripts, many of them earlier than these complete codices. These are described in more detail in some of the suggested references given last week. The earliest fragment, a portion of the gospel of John that was probably once part of a codex, is in the Rylands Library in Manchester, England. The Chester Beatty papyri collection, which is kept in Dublin, Ireland, is another significant set of manuscripts, containing large portions of papyrus codices from different parts of the 3rd century.

Most of the earliest manuscripts of the Old Testament are of the Septuagint, since it was the version used by most Christians. Most manuscripts of the Hebrew Old Testament are more recent, as explained in the notes to last week's class. (See last week's notes for details, and for the importance of the Dead Sea Scrolls and other recent finds.)

The Roman authorities, of course, made regular attempts to persecute* and destroy the early church, ending only when the emperors became Christians in the 4th century. A frequent part of these persecutions was a series of efforts to suppress the Scriptures, by making possession of them illegal. This led to different perspectives among Christians as to how to respond. While each believer had his or her own feelings on the subject, some general trends emerged.

* The history of these persecutions goes beyond the scope of our study. For more, see the histories of the early church given earlier as general references, or see the notes from the History of Christianity class of a few years ago.

In general, the churches in the east were more concerned about resisting the Romans' requests to sacrifice incense to the emperor and to acknowledge him as a god than they were about having their Bibles confiscated. The churches in Europe, closest to the center of Roman power, tended to be very pragmatic, sometimes turning in a few copies of the Scriptures in order to conceal the fact that they had many more hidden away.

More often, the European Christians gave other books to the Roman authorities, counting on the fact that the Romans did not really know what was in the Scriptures, and knowing that those who confiscate banned books often don't read them. Sometimes they gave the Romans other books of a religious or philosophical nature, just in case a Roman official read the books he had confiscated, but in at least one case a church leader was known to have given the unsuspecting Romans a large set of worn-out medical textbooks.

The churches in Northern Africa were the most resistant to cooperating with the Roman request to hand over their copies of the Scriptures, and many African Christians willingly suffered imprisonment or worse rather than surrender their Bibles. Those few church leaders who did surrender Bibles to the Romans often found it difficult to retain the respect of their congregations.

As history demonstrates, the Romans failed completely in their attempts to suppress the Scriptures. The only minor success they achieved was that in some congregations the different feelings about whether to surrender the Scriptures caused controversy and occasional division.

In fact, the Romans' efforts probably served only to motivate the Christians to make even more copies of the Scriptures and to hide them away. Rome's clumsy attempts to destroy all copies of the New Testament simply resulted in many more copies of it being saved for future generations than would otherwise have been the case. God's hand was at work to preserve his Word for future generations, even as he was also acting to protect his people in so many other respects.

Questions For Discussion or Study: How can it strengthen us spiritually to learn about the different places and languages in which the Word of God was read in the early centuries of the church? What can we learn from the devotion of the early Christians to reading and preserving the Scriptures in spite of persecution? What can we learn from the Romans' attempts to stop others from reading the New Testament?

Bibliographical Note

All of these topics are covered in one or more of the sources given with previous classes. You are welcome to see me anytime that you would like suggestions for studying any of these topics further on your own.

- *Mark Garner, November 2009*, © 2009 by Mark Garner

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THE LIVING WORD OF GOD: APPRECIATING, TRUSTING, & USING THE SCRIPTURES

Week Eleven: Translating The Scriptures - A Historical Survey

Even in the early church, the Bible was frequently translated into other languages. Translation of Scripture remains an important topic today, for in practical ministry we shall almost always be studying the Bible in translation. This week, we shall make a historical survey of Bible translation practices, and next time we shall look at English language versions of the Scriptures.

Review Of Recent Topics

The manuscript evidence for the New Testament is far more extensive and complete than is the evidence for any other ancient writing. The quantity and variety of the manuscripts, the time-span from the original autographs, and the consistency and completeness of the ancient New Testament manuscripts all demonstrate the reliability of the text as we have it today.

In the early church, the three most important languages were Greek, the international language of the time; Latin, the language of the Roman rulers; and Aramaic, the language spoken by most of the Jews* of Jesus' day. Greek had numerous dialects, but the New Testament is written in the common (Koiné) Dialect, a simplified dialect instituted by Philip of Macedon when he united Greece under Macedonian leadership.

* Recall that Hebrew was no longer widely spoken at the time. It was not revived until the 20th century.

As Latin grew in importance and came to replace Greek as the main language of the Empire, many Latin-language translations of the New Testament began to appear. The quality of these varied considerably, though, so in the 4th century AD, Jerome of Bethlehem made a much better Latin translation called the Vulgate (common or popular) version. For many centuries, this version would remain (with minor revisions) the most widely-used and accepted international Bible. Amongst those in the east who spoke Aramaic, the most widespread dialect was Syriac. The standard translation of the Scriptures in Syriac is called the Peshitta (simple) version.

The manuscript evidence for the New Testament includes three especially good-quality complete codex copies with which the others are generally compared. There is also a wide assortment of other complete copies, manuscripts of complete books, and fragments as close as 25 years to the original autographs. All of these survive in spite of many efforts by the Romans to suppress the Scriptures. Their persecution had little effect except, perhaps, for motivating the early Christians to make even more copies than they would have made anyway. With the Old Testament, most surviving manuscripts dated, until recently, from no earlier than AD 900. But the Dead Sea Scrolls and recently discovered genizahs have provided many manuscripts that are much older.

History Of Bible Translation - Basic Overview

Although the basic principles of biblical translation remain practically unchanged over the years, there are a number of identifiable eras that can teach us some different lessons. Even aside from the difficulties inherent in translation, external concerns have often affected the availability of Scripture in translation. We shall continue our historical overview where we left off last week.

When the apostle John wrote the last book of the New Testament, presenting a vision of the ultimate and complete victory of Jesus, he repeatedly mentioned that believers would come from

every nation, tribe, people, and language (Revelation 5:9, 7:9, 10:11, 11:9, 13:7, 14:6, 17:15). John repeats similar phrases to the point of redundancy, in order to emphasize that this is not merely a hope that God has. Rather, it is an inherent feature of the church of Christ that it is not, and never has been, identified with any particular nation, culture, or language. The gospel calls each of us to turn away from all such worldly loyalties, in order to live by the gospel of grace and to allow our identities to be defined by it. Our earthly allegiances, no matter how highly the world may value them, are trivial compared with our identity as Christians.

This is also the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. For example, in Daniel 7:13-14* the prophet foresees the spiritual kingdom of Jesus that will refute and render powerless the kingdoms of this earth. Jesus would not conquer militarily, but rather would expose the futility and emptiness of the things that the worldly value most highly. Jesus renders foolish and insignificant the boundaries that separate humans on this physical planet. Thus the nature of the body of Christ was foretold centuries before the Messiah would come.

* The passages in Revelation are direct references to Daniel's phraseology, but there are also many other Old Testament passages that teach the same idea with different imagery or terminology. Consider passages such as Genesis 12:1-3, Isaiah 42:6-7, and Isaiah 49:6-7. See also the discussion questions below.

From the day of Pentecost, when the church began with 3000 members who already came from many areas of the world, to the fall of the Western Roman Empire in the 5th century*, the early Christians were busy both in preserving and in translating the Scriptures, as we detailed in the previous study. By the fall of Rome, copies of the New Testament in the original Greek were available to Christians wherever the church existed, and there were also accepted translations into all of the major languages in the regions where the church had established a strong presence.

* The city of Rome was sacked by Alaric and the Visigoths in 410, severely weakening the Western Empire. When the Vandals sacked Rome again in 455, this ended the ability of Rome to exercise any real power. The line of Roman emperors was allowed to retain their title and to exert nominal authority until 476, when the Germanic chief Odoacer tired of this arrangement, and ended it once and for all by deposing the last emperor.

The Middle Ages saw changes in almost every aspect of society and culture, and the medieval church was much different from that of the early centuries AD. The nearly absolute authority of the church of Rome over the rest of the Western churches* meant that the Latin language assumed primary importance in the reading of Scripture, in worship, and in other areas of ministry. In the early Middle Ages, there were still new translations being made, as the gospel continued to reach new areas**. These attempts included the first translations into (Old) English (see the next section below).

* The Eastern churches became increasingly independent during the 5th century, and after the fall of Rome they have their own separate history. We are primarily following the history of the Western churches, since their history most directly affects us. Eastern church history is covered in some of the general church history sources given earlier. Like the Roman church authorities, the leaders of the Eastern (Orthodox) churches were far more concerned with their own power and privilege than they were with spiritual growth. Thus their history largely reflects its own set of disorders and problems.

** Whatever other deficiencies the medieval Roman Catholic Church may have had, in the earliest centuries of the Middle Ages they often showed a strong commitment to missions. They sought out new areas not yet reached by the gospel, and also re-evangelized areas such as England, where the church had weakened or disintegrated due to barbarian attacks after the fall of Rome.

All of these medieval translations, though, were made not from the original Greek text but from the Latin Vulgate version, which had become the church's approved version. Later in the Middle Ages, the authorities of the established churches would actively oppose any efforts to create new

translations of Scripture that might weaken their strong control over the worship and activity of the church. It was in this era that John Wycliffe renewed the effort to make an English translation of the Bible (see also below).

The Reformation Era (beginning in the early 1500's) saw a revival of Bible translation, as many of the reformers realized the importance of making the Scriptures available for the average Christian to study privately - something that had been strongly discouraged by the established church for several centuries. The invention of the printing press in the previous century made it possible to publish books on a scale never seen before, and the Bible illustrated the potential of this more so than any other book. New translations were printed up and distributed so quickly that the indignant authorities in Rome could not even begin to confiscate all of the copies.

One new development was the return to the original Greek text as the basis of translation. The writer and scholar Erasmus of Rotterdam, a loyal Catholic but one who desperately wanted to see his church become more obedient to the Scriptures, published a complete edition of the New Testament in Greek in 1516. This in turn gave further momentum to the growing trend of new translations that would be faithful to the original. Martin Luther, in addition to the reforms he instituted in other areas, carried out a German translation of the Bible that is still one of the standard versions in that language.

In England, William Tyndale (again see next section below) took the lead in beginning the era of Bible translations in Modern English. With the activities of Luther, Tyndale, and numerous others who worked on translations into other languages, the Roman Catholic Church eventually realized the need to adopt new translations themselves. They attempted to retain some degree of control by ensuring that Catholic translations were made from the Latin Vulgate, not from the original Greek. In English, the Douai-Rheims Version was one of the resulting products of the Counter-Reformation*.

* The New Testament was published at Rheims in 1582, and the Old Testament was published in Douai in 1609-1610. Its Catholic origins are often quite obvious - for example, Acts 2:38 is translated as "do penance, and be baptized" rather than as "repent, and be baptized", which is truer to the original.

In the modern era, the story of Bible translation continues. Of course, no other book has been translated into so many languages, and no book ever written can approach the Bible as a best-seller. The Bible has now been translated, in whole or part, into many hundreds of languages.

Questions For Discussion Or Study: Study in context some of the Scriptures mentioned at the start of this section. Can you find others on the same theme? What do they tell us about the nature of the church? Should this affect our view of the church, our means of ministry, or both, or neither? What else do we learn from the history of Bible translation?

The Bible In English - Historical Overview

Since we most often study the Bible in English, we are especially interested in the history of translations into this language. The history of the Scriptures in English goes back well into the early Middle Ages, when Old English was still being spoken. Since then, English-language versions of the Bible have both influenced and been influenced by other events in church history.

In the early church era, there was a church in the Roman province of Britannia, but it does not have a direct connection with the history of the Bible in English. In the later years of the Roman Empire, the larger part of the island of Great Britain was part of the empire, and it had also become fully dependent on Rome, both economically and militarily. After Rome fell, the Picts

and the Scots invaded Britain from the north and from Ireland. Soon afterwards, Germanic tribes* from the continent launched a series of even more devastating attacks. These invasions practically wiped out the institutions that had existed under Roman rule. Only in a few corners of the island did some of the British and their ways survive.

* The main tribes were the Saxons, the Angles (from which the name "English" comes), and the Jutes.

Some of these survivors, though, did make efforts to re-evangelize the land, and later in the Early Middle Ages missionaries sent by the Roman church also arrived in the British Isles. Eventually all of Britain and Ireland were re-evangelized and were added to the medieval Roman church, though always with some distinctive features of their own.

In this new medieval church, several translations of the Scriptures were made into Old English. Bede, who wrote an important and interesting history of England up to his day, translated most or all of the Bible into Old English in the 8th century. The version itself is now lost, though, and it is only known through references to it by Bede and other writers. Bede also wrote numerous poems that told stories or recited teachings from the Bible.

In the late 9th century, King Alfred the Great, the Saxon ruler who saved England from being conquered by the Vikings, also translated the Bible into Old English as part of a comprehensive effort to rekindle both learning and spirituality in his realm. Alfred also wrote a new law code for England that frequently referenced teachings from the Bible. Another noteworthy Old English translation was Abbot Aelfric's work in the 10th Century.

After the Norman Conquest in 1066, Middle English soon replaced Old English as the language of England. At the same time, Bible translation into English ground to a halt for about 300 years. In the 14th century, there appeared the first Middle English translations of portions of the Bible, and then suddenly John Wycliffe came on the scene in the late 14th century.

Wycliffe and his contemporary on the European continent, the Czech Jan Hus, were courageous forerunners of the 16th century reformers, calling for a return to the teachings of the Bible. Although the Roman authorities strongly opposed Wycliffe's activities, he acquired a large following in England, and supervised a translation of the Bible into Middle English that became quite popular. Wycliffe himself did large portions of the translating, with associates handling other portions of the work. The translation was made from the only readily available source, which was still the Latin Vulgate. His Bible was first completed in 1382, just a couple of years before his death.

The first translations into Modern English arose during the Reformation Era. The pioneer was William Tyndale, who released his English translation in installments beginning in 1525. Tyndale's was the first English language translation ever made from the original languages, and it initiated a surge in the demand for English-language Bibles. For this great service to believers in the Bible, Tyndale was arrested, imprisoned, and executed by King Henry VIII, praying as he died for God to "open the King of England's eyes".

Throughout the 16th century, Tyndale's example led to a steady stream of new versions in English. Until the coming of the King James Version, the most widely used was probably the Geneva Bible, so called because it was first published in 1560 in Geneva, Switzerland, where John Calvin's influence was strong. The Geneva Bible was strongly influenced by Calvin's Reformed doctrines, but it did set a high standard for textual scholarship that stood out among most of the versions of the era. There was also a special Scottish edition of the Geneva Bible,

dedicated to King James VI, who in 1603 became King James I of England. Many other versions likewise attracted popularity, for at least a short time, amongst certain audiences*.

* These include the Coverdale Bible (1535), Matthew's Bible (1537), the "Great Bible" (1539, followed later by revised editions), and the Bishops' Bible (1568, second edition in 1572), as well as the Roman Catholic Douai-Rheims version mentioned above.

While the sudden proliferation of Bibles in English was a good thing for those who believed in the importance of personal study, the numerous translations often had marked differences in their renderings of important passages, and all of them revealed to some degree the personal beliefs of their translators. This somewhat confusing situation came to the attention of King James I. Soon after becoming king, he appointed a carefully chosen group of biblical and language scholars to work together on a new translation, with the goal of giving it royal approval as the Authorized Version (the original name of what we call the "King James Version") throughout England.

The new Bible, released in 1611, set a new standard in Bible translation, and indeed it is the pattern for all standard versions. Using the original Greek and Hebrew text as the basis for the new translation, the translators also took note of the strengths and weaknesses of the previous versions of the Bible in English. For the first time, the use of a large panel with different personal viewpoints eliminated the widespread sectarian biases that had affected earlier versions, despite their virtues. As a bonus, the translators also proved highly skilled in rendering the Scriptures in prose that was clear (to readers of the time) and often majestic. Today, even those believers who have never read the King James itself owe it a debt whenever they read one of the highly accurate standard versions that followed the pattern first set by the Authorized Version and its translators.

Most recent standard translations either descend from the King James or at least follow its example and principles. Though initially somewhat slow to win full public acceptance, it soon displaced all earlier versions in English, and was almost unrivaled until the late 19th century. The Revised Version (published in England in 1881 and 1885) and the American Standard Version (1901) came as attempts to maintain the strengths of the King James while improving certain secondary aspects. But not until the mid- to late-20th century did newer versions such as the Revised Standard Version, the New American Standard Bible, and the New International Version finally win over the majority of the Bible-reading public. Next week, we shall discuss some of these newer versions.

Questions For Discussion or Study: What connections are there between the availability of Bibles and the spiritual health of the church? Is the mere availability of Bibles enough to promote spiritual health? If not, what else is needed? What can we learn from the history of the Bible in English?

Bibliographical Note

All of these topics are covered in general sources listed in earlier notes. Another recommended book is *God's Secretaries: The Making Of The King James Bible*, by Adam Nicolson.

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THE LIVING WORD OF GOD: APPRECIATING, TRUSTING, & USING THE SCRIPTURES

Week Twelve: English Language Versions Of The Scriptures

We shall conclude our study with a brief look at the most familiar English language versions of the Bible. We first need to consider some basic decisions that translators must make, and the ways that these decisions are reflected in the versions of Scripture that we use. There is no such thing as a 'best' English-language version, because all of them have strengths and weaknesses.

Review Of Last Week's Topics

A historical overview of Bible translation helps also to put the present era into perspective. In the early church, the major languages of Greek, Latin, and Aramaic (Syriac) all had well-known, widely-circulated versions of the Bible emphasizing readability and access for the average reader. In the Middle Ages, the Roman Church was increasingly guided by authoritarian leaders, and church officials began to suppress all versions except for the Latin Vulgate.

In the Reformation Era, new versions of the Bible were quite common, but many of the new versions were slanted towards particular sects and their doctrines. One positive step was the return to the use of the original Greek as the basis for translation. In the modern era, a variety of standard versions have been made that represent a consensus view of translators from many backgrounds and fellowships. There are also many private or specialty translations of the Bible, which are less accurate but can have their uses in some cases.

The first Bibles in English were made in the early Middle Ages, and were written in what we now call Old English. Most of the Middle English period coincides with the era when the established medieval church suppressed the translation of Scripture into contemporary languages. But the Wycliffe Bible was still published in this era, despite strong opposition. The first Bibles in Modern English appeared during the 1500s, and were very inconsistent in quality. The Authorized or "King James" Version was the first truly standard version, published in 1611. The best and most widely-used contemporary versions usually follow similar principles.

Introduction To Bible Translation

There are many differences between any two languages, especially when translating from an ancient language into a modern one. Thus, translating Scripture into English is never a simple matter of one-for-one substitution of one word for another. The many differences between English and the original languages of Scripture present translators with a variety of problems.

Even if everyone in the world spoke the same language, there would still be a crucial obstacle. Anytime that we read, write, or talk about God, we are trying to describe spiritual, eternal, perfect truths using human, mortal, imperfect vocabulary. God speaks through his Creation, through his Word, and sometimes through humans, but in all cases he is communicating thoughts that we mere mortals cannot describe adequately with human language; nor could our mortal minds fully comprehend them. This is why passages such as Psalm 19:1-3a tell us that everything in the universe declares the glory of God. To grow in our understanding God, we must listen to everything he tells us, not just those things we find easy to grasp or accept.

Paul discusses similar ideas in 1 Corinthians. In contrasting human wisdom and eloquence with God's wisdom, which comes from the Spirit, the apostle differentiates the words taught by

human wisdom from words taught by the Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:12-14). The Spirit teaches us as best as it is possible to do, given our mortal limitations of mind and of language. We simply cannot eliminate the need for humility and faith in understanding God. This, then, is compounded by the differences amongst human languages themselves.

Classical Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament, was revived as the language of many modern Jews in the 19th and 20th centuries, but for many centuries it was only a scholar's language. It is a Semitic language, and differs in many respects from Indo-European languages such as English, French, Spanish, and the like. Hebrew is written from right to left, so that in order to read Hebrew one must go across the page "backwards" and read books "from back to front". Also, there are no vowels in the alphabet, though they do exist in the spoken language. Natural speakers of Hebrew supply them from context and experience. A system of markings to indicate vowels was developed long ago in order to enable non-native speakers to read the language, but in placing them in an original text, there can be two or more valid possibilities*.

* Suppose we wrote English this way. CN Y RD THS? PRBBLY, BT WHT BT THS - JN RD TH BK. Does it mean 'John read the book', or 'Jane rode the bike'?

Hebrew grammar is also much different from that of most European languages. There are only a handful of verb tenses, which are used quite flexibly for different purposes. There are some standard constructions with nouns for which there is no English equivalent. Thus it is often not possible to translate Hebrew word-for-word in the same order as the original. Further, because Hebrew was a "dead language" for so many centuries, there are many vocabulary words whose precise meaning can no longer be determined*.

* For example, the lists of animals in Leviticus 11 include several creatures that cannot be determined with certainty. In verses 13-19, for instance, it is clear that all of the creatures listed are birds or other flying animals, but in several cases the translators are really just guessing as to the particular species.

Ancient Greek is a European language, and is more similar to English than is Hebrew, but it has complexities we do not have in our own language. The Greek alphabet is somewhat similar, and some letters have direct equivalents in our alphabet, but others have no parallel. More significant differences appear in the grammar. Greek nouns are declined for gender and case, meaning that any particular noun can appear with numerous endings, and there are no fewer than 17 different words equivalent to the English word "the". Likewise, Greek verbs have numerous tenses and voices, and while these can be memorized with enough work, following the rules literally does not always produce a useful translation. The vocabulary of the New Testament is less difficult, since the dialect used is the Koiné (common) dialect, yet there are still many words that do not have a direct equivalent, or that have more than one possible equivalent.

Besides the two main languages of the Scriptures, there are also several passages in Aramaic, a sister language to Hebrew. (See also earlier notes.) Like most Jews of his time, Jesus probably spoke most of the time in Aramaic, and on a handful of occasions, his exact words in Aramaic are recorded in the gospel accounts (for example, Matthew 27:46, Mark 5:41, Mark 7:34, Mark 15:34). In the Old Testament, there are four passages in Aramaic (Ezra 4:8-6:18, Ezra 7:12-26, Jeremiah 10:11, and Daniel 2:4-7:28). Aramaic is similar to Hebrew, but there are also differences, so Old Testament translators must be familiar with Aramaic to translate these books.

For translators, the choices begin with the decision of which manuscript text to follow. Although there is a remarkably high degree of consistency in the manuscript evidence, there are times, especially in the Old Testament, when translators must choose from among variant readings. This rarely alters the meaning significantly, but it is necessary to have a consistent approach.

More difficult decisions arise due to the different grammatical structures between the original languages and most current languages. Translators usually decide at the very beginning whether to translate word-for-word as far as possible, or whether to attempt translate meaning-for-meaning, even if word order or structure is significantly altered. A word-for-word approach is called a literal translation, and it has the virtue of making erroneous translations more unlikely. It has the drawback of being at times ambiguous. Among current translations, the New American Standard is the most literal. The meaning-for-meaning approach is sometimes called dynamic equivalence. Translators taking this approach place a high priority on readability and meaning, which makes such translations easier to grasp than literal translations. To do this, though, runs the risk of possibly introducing a meaning that may not have been intended originally. The New International Version is the best-known example of this approach.

Here are two brief examples, using the NASB and NIV*, to illustrate the difference between these approaches. For 1 Thessalonians 1:3, in the NASB Paul refers to "your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope", while the NIV has him say, "your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope". In the Greek original, the words faith, love, and hope all have an ending known as the genitive case, which means that to translate the noun in English you should add the word "of" or "from" in front of it**. The NASB translators took the literal approach, and left it like this, leaving a little ambiguity in the meaning, but saying nothing not in the original. The NIV translators felt that from context these phrases could be rendered more definitely. Both translations are valid, given the policies used. If this were a case where the exact meaning were crucial to some important point, it would be important to be aware of both translations, and to compare them with other related verses.

* The King James also takes the literal approach. In these examples (and most others), the KJV reading is similar to the NASB's. The Revised Standard is in the middle of the NASB and NIV. Some versions, such as the New English Bible and the Good News Bible, are even more towards the 'dynamic equivalence' end of the spectrum than is the NIV. They can be even more readable, but are sometimes less accurate.

** Literally, for example, in Greek the first part of the phrase says "(of) you the work the faith", and the words "the faith" have the genitive ending, meaning that this noun is "of" or "from" the preceding noun. The other expressions in the verse follow the same basic form.

A second example is the Greek word "sarx" (σὰρξ). It literally means "flesh", and it can occur in many different contexts. As we do with some English words, the Greeks used it very flexibly, and it did not always mean the same thing that we mean with our word "flesh". Because it can mean many different things in English, the NASB translators stick with the literal rendering "flesh" in all cases, in order to avoid any possible error. They thus do not make any assumptions about being able to interpret which shade of meaning that the writer had in mind. In 2 Corinthians 5:16, they translate the Greek "kata sarx" literally, as "according to the flesh". The NIV translators want to avoid ambiguity, and thus they try to find an English word or phrase that might best approximate the writer's meaning. Here, they translate "kata sarx" as "from a worldly point of view". While these specific words are not in the original, in this instance it probably is very much the meaning that Paul had in mind. Below we shall look at more examples.

Other questions that frequently arise involve units of measure, units of money, and the like. If there is a clear equivalent, as with distances or weights, translators will often use these. Otherwise, it can be safer to give a literal rendering. With money, inflation and currency unit changes make it almost impossible to give meaningful direct equivalents. Translators might keep the original amounts and names, and give footnotes to explain them*. Yet it still is not always possible to make such examples as clear to a modern reader as they were originally.

* For example, some versions note (in passages like Matthew 20:1-14 and 22:19) that the denarius was a coin generally used to pay the daily wage of an average workman in the 1st century.

Questions For Discussion or Study: In choosing whether to translate word-for-word or meaning-for-meaning, what reasons could support each policy? Is either "right"? In what ways might it be helpful to know the translators' policy when we read our own versions of the Bible? Should this affect our confidence in reading the Bible?

Survey Of Selected English Language Translations

Today, there are many English-language versions of the Scriptures, with a few of them being particularly popular. We shall compare some of those that are most widely used and/or that are important for historical reasons. All of these versions have their own strengths and weaknesses. Our brief survey is intended only to give you some small idea of the differences that can arise.

The King James Version (or Authorized Version) has an importance that goes beyond the number of readers who still use it regularly. It was the pattern for all standard translations that followed, and it is an accurate translation whose main drawback today is its 17-century means of expression. There is also now a New King James Version, which is an effort to preserve the virtues and tradition of the KJV while making some useful revisions.

The King James is a literal translation from the original languages (similar to the NASB). There is only one actual flaw with the KJV, and it is a flaw that was not possible for the translators of the time to address. The KJV translators followed a version of the original Hebrew and Greek called the "Textus Receptus", which was based on the best available manuscripts of the time. In the centuries that have passed since then, many older and better manuscripts have been discovered, especially of the Old Testament. Thus there are many places where a word or two could be corrected in the KJV using new evidence that those translators did not have. See, for example, 1 Samuel 8:16 (KJV: "young men"; NIV: "cattle") and Mark 1:2 (KJV: "the prophets"; NIV: "Isaiah the prophet"). In these cases and in others that could be referenced, the NIV is the correct rendering, but note that these, and almost all of the others, are trivial differences.

When reading the King James, readers should also be aware that many words and expressions have changed over the years. As just one example, when 1 Peter 2:9 says that Christians are "a peculiar people", this does not mean that they are weird or strange, but that they are special (or reserved) since that is what "peculiar" meant in that context in 1611. Likewise, the pronouns "thou" and "thine" may strike readers as stilted formalities, but in their original use they expressed familiarity and intimacy*. To understand them correctly, we should remember that, for example, when God is addressed as "thou", it is by no means a formality, but is instead quite the opposite. As one more example, in 1611 the word 'tongue' meant a (foreign) language.

* "Thou" used to be the English equivalent of the French "tu" or the German "du", as the second person singular pronoun used when it was appropriate to express closeness or intimacy. English has now lost this useful distinction, and simply uses "you" for all second person references.

In considering recent versions, there is an important distinction between standard translations, private translations, and paraphrase versions. Standard translations are those that, like the KJV, were produced by a large group of translators with different perspectives. These are the versions most suited as primary sources of teaching, especially when establishing important points.

Private translations are those created by one person, or perhaps a small group of like-minded individuals. These can be useful and popular for reading, and some of them are important historically as well - for example, Wycliffe's and Tyndale's translations were private translations. Moffat's translation was popular in the early half of the 20th century, and the translation by J. B. Phillips is one example of a private translation that is popular today. Used properly, these can be useful. But since they are based on only a single perspective, it is simply not possible for them to avoid reflecting this perspective sometimes. Thus these versions can contain inaccuracies.

Of less value are paraphrases like the "Living Bible". While they too can be useful for their readability, they often create whole new meanings (not always deliberately), and cannot be considered as true translations. Paraphrase versions tend strongly to reflect their editors' beliefs.

Returning to specific standard versions, the Revised Standard Version (completed in 1952, now followed by the New Revised Standard Version) was an attempt to incorporate the strengths of the KJV into a more readable translation. It is not "dynamic" to the degree of the NIV, and in many respects it represents a balance between the two approaches. It became more widely read than most of the earlier attempts to update the language of the KJV without losing its strengths.

Among recent standard versions, the New American Standard and the New International are probably the most representative of the literal equivalence approach and the meaning-for-meaning translation, respectively. Each has its strong points, and the choice between the two is really not a question of which is "best", since each does some things particularly well. For serious study, it is a good idea to have both versions (or other examples of each approach) available. We shall give just a few more examples, following up on those above, in order further to illustrate how these versions usually compare. You can find other examples either through studying different versions in parallel, or by referring to some of the recommended sources.

As noted above, in the Greek "genitive case", a noun has an ending meaning that it should be translated with the word "of" or "from" added on. Hebrews 1:3 is another example of this. In the Greek, there is a phrase that word-for-word says "the word the power him". "Power" and "him" both have the genitive ending, so adding the 'ofs' implied by the endings thus makes it "the word of the power of him". This is translated literally in the KJV and NASB as "the word of his power", but in the NIV it is translated "his powerful word", which is certainly clearer, and which is a good guess as the intended meaning, but which also does make a certain assumption about the author's intent. One more example of this would be Ephesians 1:13, where the KJV and NASB have "the Holy Spirit of promise" and the NIV has "the promised Holy Spirit".

Our final examples are further instances of the Greek word "sarx" ("flesh"). In Romans 8:3-9, the NIV translates it several times as "sinful nature". In Romans 1:3, it uses "human nature", and in Colossians 1:22 it has "physical (body)". In each case, the translators wanted to avoid ambiguity, and made their best guess as to the meaning intended by the Spirit. In all of these verses, the NASB and KJV simply use the literal word "flesh", leaving it to the reader to interpret for himself or herself which of the possible shades of meaning was originally intended.

Neither approach is wrong, and both approaches can be useful. In standard versions like these, such decisions were not based on one person's opinion, but on a careful review by an entire panel. This does not mean that their decisions are right - rather, it means that any mistakes are at least not attributable to one particular viewpoint. These examples illustrate a few difficulties facing translators*, and they indicate how fortunate we are to have several English language versions that were carefully produced so as to avoid dependence on any one perspective.

* Some further examples to study if you have time (read them in multiple versions):

- a) In 1 Thessalonians 5:14, compare the different kinds of persons in the church, and how to help them.
- b) In Acts 15:40, the last verb can mean 'committed' or 'commended'. But 'commended' can make it seem as if Paul and Silas are being praised (which the Greek word cannot mean). Also, the KJV uses 'recommended', which is an example of a word whose meaning has changed somewhat since 1611.
- c) A common euphemism in 1 Corinthians 7:1 is handled in very different ways by the NIV and other versions. What might you need to do in order to find the most precise meaning?
- d) Matthew 11:12 is a well-known NIV that has often been misused. The word translated 'lay hold of' means literally 'do violence to'; the verse criticizes 'forceful (or violent) men' - it does not praise them. The other versions are more accurate. The NIV is not literally wrong, but it is certainly misleading.
- e) Greek has two words that are usually translated as 'man'. But *ανθρωπος* ("anthropos") literally means a human being of either gender, while *ανηρ* ("aner") means a male individual. Luke 9:25, for example, literally means something like, "What gains a person by obtaining the whole world yet losing or forfeiting his or her very self?" See how the different versions handle this.

So these versions are not perfect in every detail, as the original manuscripts were. But God wants us to read his Word, and he does not require us to devote time to ancient language study in order to know his will. The translators of the KJV, RSV, NASB, NIV, &c knew they were imperfect, and they worked as a group so that at least no one person's viewpoint would have an undue impact. Our confidence is not in these translators, but in God. No version is perfect, but we have several generally accurate, readable editions of God's Word from which to study. We ought then to be abundantly thankful, and to be all the more eager to study and to learn.

Questions For Discussion or Study: When might it be useful or important to study a verse in multiple versions? When could we rely on the phrasing of just one version? How could we pick a 'main' version for personal study? If we like a version that is a private translation or a paraphrase, how can we make good use of it while being careful to avoid misunderstandings? Is it possible to become too attached to a favorite version?

Bibliographical Note

Many versions of the Bible have their own introductions that explain their translation policies in detail. For the NIV, there is also a more detailed description entitled *The Making of the NIV*, edited by Kenneth Barker. The book *God's Secretaries: The Making Of The King James Bible*, by Adam Nicolson, does the same for the King James. Parallel Bibles are quite useful for understanding the differences amongst various versions. Some good parallel Bibles include:

The Precise Parallel New Testament, Oxford University Press
The Contemporary Parallel New Testament, Oxford University Press
Eight Translation New Testament, Tyndale House Publishers
The Evangelical Parallel New Testament, Oxford University Press

Each of these contains 8 different versions (a different 8 in each case). There are also many other editions with 2 or 3 versions in parallel, both of the New Testament and of the whole Bible.

- Mark Garner, December 2009, © 2009 by Mark Garner

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