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1

History of the New Testament Writings

The last words God ever wrote to man are recorded on the pages of the New Testament. The book is that momentous and precious. The purpose of this introductory chapter is to describe what the New Testament is and how it came to be, so that the reader's appreciation of its value will be enhanced. The principle applied here is, "He uses best what he values most."

I. GOD'S FINAL REVELATION

In the Old Testament God had given a partial revelation of Himself, having spoken through prophets and angels, but the full and final revelation came by His Son Jesus. "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" (Heb. 1:1-2a, NIV). Observe how the two eras are compared in the accompanying diagram.

After Jesus had provided purification for sins, "He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high," because His atoning death was finished (Heb. 1:3; cf. John 19:30). The revelation was that final. The written Word of the New Testament records the story and revelation of this Son of God.

To say that the New Testament is God's final revelation of Himself is not to say that the Old Testament is obsolete. The New Testament was never intended to replace the Old. Rather, it is the sequel to the Old Testament's origins, heir of its promises, fruit of its seed, the peak of its mountain. The ministry of Christ would be an enigma without the Old Testament. For example, it is the Old

Testament that explains Jesus' words, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 15:24). The best preparation for a study of the New Testament is to become acquainted with the foundations of the Old.

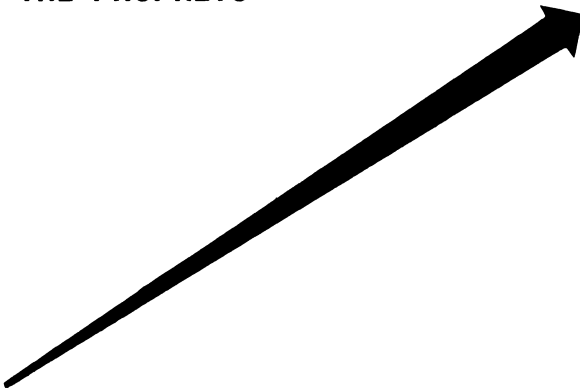
REVELATION THEN AND NOW

-then-

**GOD SPOKE
THROUGH
THE PROPHETS**

-now-

**GOD HAS SPOKEN
BY
HIS SON**



Old Testament

New Testament

As God's final revelation, the New Testament records the fulfillments of Old Testament prophecy, the last words and works of Christ on earth, the birth and growth of Christ's church, prophecies of the last times, and clear statements and interpretations of the Christian faith. Every earnest Christian wants to spend much time studying these final words of God.

II. THE NEW TESTAMENT FROM GOD TO US

There was already a "Bible" when the first New Testament books were being written. Usually that book of God was referred to as the

Scripture(s) (e.g., Matt. 21:42). We now call it the Old Testament; it was the only Bible of Jesus and the apostles. Then, a couple of decades after Christ's ascension, the Holy Spirit began to move and inspire chosen saints to write letters and historical accounts that would eventually be brought together in a volume to be known as the New Testament.

Today when we hold a copy of the English New Testament in our hands, it is fair to ask how accurately it represents the original autographs. Involved in the answer is the history of the New Testament — from God (first century A.D.) to us (twentieth century). It is a fascinating story of miracles, involving stages of transmission, canonization, and translation. The starting point of such a history is divine revelation.

A. REVELATION

Revelation is God's communication of truth to man, without which man cannot know God. The word *revelation* (*apocalypsis*) means "uncovering," or "drawing away of a veil."

Before there was any Scripture, God revealed Himself to man through such media as conscience, nature (*general* revelation), and direct conversation with people (*special* revelation).¹ But there was need of a form of revelation that would be permanent, explicit, and retentive of a large volume of revealed truth. For that, God chose the written form of human language to be read, learned, and applied by all the succeeding generations. In the words of Gleason Archer,

If there be a God, and if He is concerned for our salvation, this is the only way (apart from direct revelation from God to each individual of each successive generation) He could reliably impart this knowledge to us. It must be through a reliable written record such as the Bible purports to be.²

Recall the powerful words of Hebrews 1:1-3 (NIV) studied earlier: *God. . . has spoken to us by his Son*. The Son is the Living Word; the Bible is the written Word of the Son.

B. INSPIRATION

All the books of the Bible — New Testament as well as Old Testament — came into being by the Holy Spirit's direct ministry of inspiration. Two crucial questions at this point are: How did the

1. Read Romans 1:18-21 for an example of general revelation, and Genesis 3:8-19 for an example of special revelation.

2. Gleason L. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, p. 15. Read this same source for a good discussion of the inadequacies of oral tradition as a sole transmitter of God's special revelation to man.

human authors know what God wanted them to write? and, Were their writings without error? We cannot explain the supernatural process of inspiration that brought about the original writings of the Bible. Paul refers to the process as *God-breathing*. (Read 2 Timothy 3:16, where the phrase "inspired by God" translates the Greek *theopneustia*, which literally means "God-breathed.") Peter says the Bible authors were undergirded, or carried along, by the Holy Spirit. ("Men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit," 2 Pet. 1:21, NIV.) These verses, along with many others, assure us that when the Bible authors wrote, all their words expressed infallibly and without error the truths that God wanted to convey to mankind. In the original autographs, all the words were infallible in truth, and final in authority. Such accuracy applies to every part of the originals — to matters of history and science as well as to spiritual truths. If the Bible student does not believe this scriptural infallibility and inerrancy, his study of the biblical text will be haunted by confusing and destructive doubts.

As noted earlier, when the New Testament authors were writing their manuscripts, the only complete body of Scripture was the Old Testament.³ The question may be asked, Were the New Testament writers aware that they were composing works that would eventually become part of the total Scriptures of God? This is a valid question, because not everything the authors wrote became part of the New Testament.⁴ We do not know to what extent the writers sensed or discerned the God-breathing or undergirding ministry of the Spirit in their minds and hearts as they wrote. They were surely conscious that they were recording God's truth (see 1 Cor. 14:37), just as they knew they were preaching His glad tidings publicly (see Gal. 1:11,12). Regardless of the nature of their own personal perception that they were authoring *uniquely inspired* manuscripts at the time they wrote, the truth remains unshakeable, based on the Bible's own statements of its origin, that all the Scriptures were inspired, written by chosen authors who were undergirded as they wrote. Just what New Testament books were among those inspired Scriptures is the subject of our later study of canonization.

3. Individual New Testament books were in the process of being recognized as Scripture after their public appearances, but the timing varied from book to book. (This will be studied later under Canonization.) For example, when Paul wrote 1 Timothy (A.D. 62), the gospel according to Luke (A.D. 60) was recognized as part of Scripture. Read 1 Timothy 5:18, where Paul quotes from Deuteronomy 24:15 and Luke 10:7 under the same heading "Scripture."

4. For example, in 1 Corinthians 5:9 Paul refers to an earlier letter written to the Corinthian church. That letter was not intended by God to be a part of inspired Scripture.

C. THE ORIGINAL AUTOGRAPHS

The twenty-seven books of the New Testament were written over a period of about fifty years (c. A.D. 45-95), by eight or nine authors. All but a few words and phrases were written in Koine Greek, which was the marketplace vernacular of the first-century Mediterranean world.⁵ It was written in that universal language to make it initially accessible to world readership.

The writing material of most of the autographs was paperlike papyrus. (Some autographs might have been written on animal skins, such as parchment or vellum.) Sheets of papyrus, usually about ten inches long, were attached together to make a long, rolled-up scroll, easy for reading.⁶ (The paged codex, or book, did not supplement the roll until the second or third century A.D.) The Bible text was written in vertical columns with pen and ink, with no space between words, sentences, or paragraphs, and with no punctuation marks. Verse and chapter divisions were not made until centuries later.

Most of the New Testament books were letters (epistles) written to individuals (e.g., 1 Tim. 1:1-2), churches (e.g., 1 Thess. 1:1), or groups of believers (e.g., 1 Pet. 1:1-2). Luke wrote a gospel and a historical book to share with a friend Theophilus (Acts 1:1), and it is very likely that the other three gospels were written to share with individuals or churches.⁷

The present order (canon) of books in our New Testament is not the chronological order in which the books were written. Chart 1 shows a suggested chronological order of writing for the New Testament books.⁸ Study the chart carefully and try to visualize the growing zeal of the saints during the last decades of the first century as the inspired writings began to circulate from city to city. Answer the following questions on the basis of the information supplied by the chart.

1. What was the first book to be written? the last? How many years transpired between the two?

2. Note when each of the gospels appeared.⁹ One of the reasons the gospels were not the first books to appear was that much of the

5. At about ten places in the originals the authors recorded Aramaic words or phrases and usually gave the translation in Greek. See Mark 15:34.

6. One sheet was used for short books, such as Jude.

7. These background facts will be studied in more detail as each individual book is surveyed.

8. The dates when New Testament books were written are not part of the Bible text. Most dates, however, have been accurately determined, usually by associating the author with historical references in various books. The dates of each of the books will be studied in more detail in the survey section of this book.

9. There are differing views concerning the dates of Matthew and Mark. Some Bible students hold that Mark was the first gospel written.

**A CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER OF
THE WRITING OF THE NEW TESTAMENT BOOKS**

CHART 1

BOOK	AUTHOR		PLACE WRITTEN	DATE A.D.	PERIODS		
					PERSONNEL	APOSTOLIC LITERATURE	CHURCHES
JAMES	James		Jerusalem	45		BEGINNINGS	FOUNDING
GALATIANS	Paul	JOURNEY EPISTLES	} Corinth	48	FIRST PAULINE PERIOD		
1 THESS				52			
2 THESS				55			
1 COR				56			
2 COR		Ephesus					
ROMANS		Macedonia					
		Corinth					
MATTHEW	Matthew		Jerusalem?	58	FIRST HISTORICAL RECORDS	CENTRAL	ESTABLISHING
LUKE	Luke		Rome	61			
ACTS	"						
COLOSSIANS	Paul	PRISON EPISTLES	Rome	61	CENTRAL PAULINE PERIOD		
EPHESIANS							
PHILEMON							
PHILIPPIANS							
1 TIMOTHY	Paul	PASTORAL EPISTLES	Macedonia	62	PAUL'S LEGACY		
TITUS			Corinth?	—			
2 TIMOTHY			Rome	67			
HEBREWS	?						
JUDE	Jude						
1 PETER	Peter						
2 PETER	Mark			68?	PETER'S LEGACY		
MARK							
JOHN	John		Ephesus?	85	JOHN'S LEGACY	CLOSING	CONTINUING
1 JOHN							
2 JOHN							
3 JOHN							
REVELATION			Patmos	96			

There are various opinions as to the order of writing. For example, some place Galatians later and Mark earlier.

content, such as the spoken words of Jesus, was already being shared with the people in oral form, having been memorized precisely.

3. Note the three periods of apostolic literature. Approximately how long was each period? There was a fifteen-year interim of "silent years" between the central and closing periods. The destruction of Jerusalem took place in A.D. 70. Is any connection suggested between that event and the hiatus of writing?

4. The books' ministries to the local churches are identified by what three words (for the three main periods)? What is involved in each of the ministries?

5. Note the three Pauline periods. Scan the lists of books written during those times.

6. The gospel according to Mark is identified as Peter's legacy, because the apostle Peter was a key reporter to Mark of the narrative of Jesus' life.

7. Observe the different kinds of writings authored by John (gospel, epistle, vision).

8. The epistle of James stresses good works in the life of the believer. Why would such a message be the first one to be sent out in written form to the people of God?

9. In what sense was the book of Revelation logically the *last* written communication to the church?

D. TRANSMISSION

Transmission is the process by which the biblical manuscripts have been copied and recopied down through the ages, by hand or machine. God caused or allowed each of the original New Testament autographs to disappear from the scene, but not before copies were already in the hands of His people.¹⁰

Copies of the New Testament books were handwritten by scribes until the middle of the fifteenth century A.D. when Gutenberg invented movable type for the printing press. Scribal errors have been made in the copies,¹¹ but God has preserved the text from doctrinal error to this present time. Thousands of Greek and non-Greek manuscripts of all or part of the New Testament text, supportive of the text's purity, exist today. Benjamin B. Warfield says that the purity is unrivalled:

Such has been the care with which the New Testament has been copied,
— a care which has doubtless grown out of true reverence for its holy

10. One of God's reasons for not preserving the original autographs might have been man's proneness to worship material objects. Also, even if a genuine biblical autograph existed today, how could one *prove* that it was an original autograph?

11. Even Bibles printed in the "modern" twentieth century have printers' errors!

works, — such has been the providence of God in preserving for His Church in each and every age a competently exact text of the Scriptures, that . . . the New Testament [is] unrivalled among ancient writings in the purity of its text as actually transmitted and kept in use. . . .¹²

So when you are holding a copy of the New Testament in your hands, you may rest assured that it is a wholly dependable translation, which represents the original, inspired autographs of the first century. As divine author, God wrote an infallible book (inspiration); as divine protector, He has preserved the text from doctrinal error (transmission).

E. CANONIZATION

Canonization is the identification of a writing as being part of the Scripture. It was not enough that God inspired the *writing* of each book of the Bible. He also gave to His people, in a collective sense,¹³ the spiritual perception to *recognize* in each of these books genuine marks of divine inspiration and authority.¹⁴ With the Holy Spirit's guidance, they knew what spurious writings to reject, as well as what genuine writings to accept. It was a long human process over a few hundred years, many of the details of which are veiled in obscurity. But it is clear that God's supernatural hand, working through humans, brought His inspired writings into the canon and excluded other writings.

1. *Order of the New Testament books.* The canon of the New Testament is the list of all the New Testament books that God inspired. Although the last New Testament book was written by A.D. 100, for the next couple centuries questions persisted concerning whether some books, such as 3 John, were inspired. By the end of the fourth century A.D. the canon was solidified, being composed of twenty-seven books.

Five of the New Testament books are historical in content; twenty-one are epistles (letters); and one is apocalyptic (revelation of visions). The order in which they appear in our Bible is this:

History: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts

Epistles: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephe-

12. Benjamin B. Warfield, *An Introduction to the Textual Criticism of the New Testament*, p. 12.

13. The canon was not determined by any one person or council, or even at any point of time. The canon kept growing over a period of years, with God's people in *that* collective sense recognizing the signs of inspiration in the books that eventually would be grouped as one covenant (testament) of twenty-seven books.

14. Authority is the basis for canonicity. Since God sealed each book with authority, it is He who originally canonized each book.

CANONICAL ORDER OF N.T. BOOKS

HISTORY	1. MATTHEW 2. MARK 3. LUKE 4. JOHN 5. ACTS	
S T L E S	6. ROMANS 7. 1 CORINTHIANS 8. 2 CORINTHIANS 9. GALATIANS 10. EPHESIANS 11. PHILIPPIANS 12. COLOSSIANS 13. 1 THESSALONIANS 14. 2 THESSALONIANS 15. 1 TIMOTHY 16. 2 TIMOTHY 17. TITUS 18. PHILEMON	} to churches } to individuals
P I S T E P I N E	19. HEBREWS 20. JAMES 21. 1 PETER 22. 2 PETER 23. 1 JOHN 24. 2 JOHN 25. 3 JOHN 26. JUDE	NON-PAULINE
VISIONS	27. REVELATION	

sians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, Jude

Visions: Revelation

We do not know how or by whom the above order was determined, but the locations of most of the books in the list can be justified or explained in a variety of ways.¹⁵ Refer to Chart 2 and observe the following:

a. Doctrine is grounded in fact, so the historical books (gospels and Acts) precede the epistles (where doctrine is prominent).

b. Revelation stands last because it is mainly about the end times.

c. Matthew, written especially with the Jew in mind, is a link between the Old Testament and the New and so appears first in the canon.

d. John is the gospel with much interpretation and reflection, written at the end of the first century, and so it fits best as the last of the four gospels.

e. Acts is the extension and fulfillment of the gospels, the proof that what Christ said and did was true and efficacious. It follows the gospels very naturally.

Acts can be associated with the epistles without overlooking the historical connection with the gospels. The accompanying diagram shows such comparisons.¹⁶

COMPARISONS OF NEW TESTAMENT BOOKS

GOSPELS	ACTS & EPISTLES	REVELATION
Past	Present	Future
Christ as Prophet	Christ as Priest	Christ as King
Setting: Israel	Setting: Church	Setting: Universe
Founder of Christianity	Fundamentals of Christianity	Fulfillment of Christianity
Introduction	Application	Realization
The Christ	The Church	The Consummation

15. One writer has proposed the view that there is an orderly progress of doctrine advanced from book to book, as reflected in the order of the New Testament canon. He writes, "As the several books gradually coalesced into unity it might be expected that . . . they would on the whole tend to assume their relative places, according to the law of internal fitness . . ." (Thomas D. Bernard, *The Progress of Doctrine in The New Testament*, p. vii).

16. Adapted from W. Graham Scroggie, *Know Your Bible*, 2:16.

f. Paul wrote most of the New Testament books (at least thirteen¹⁷), and his books were among the earliest to be written (see Chart 1). So his are the first of the epistles (Romans-Philemon).

g. The order of Paul's letters in the canon has various explanations.¹⁸ The first nine (Romans-2 Thessalonians) were written to churches; the last four (1 Timothy-Philemon) were written to individuals. The key opening epistle, Romans, is the classic book on salvation and the Christian walk. The Corinthian letters and Galatians, listed together, treat problems of the churches. Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians are usually kept together because all three were written from prison in Rome, and all three focus on deeper Christian living. The Thessalonian letters are last among the letters to churches; these look into the future, about Christ's second coming.

h. Paul's letters to individuals (1 Timothy-Philemon) appear last. They were among the last letters Paul wrote (see Chart 1). In the canon his letters to Timothy appear first. Timothy was Paul's closest companion and was serving in the key city of Ephesus. Philemon is Paul's shortest letter and contains the least doctrine of all his writings. The message of his letter to Titus is similar to the message of the Timothy letters and follows them accordingly.

i. The last eight letters are non-Pauline. For that reason alone they would be placed *after* Paul's letters, because the apostle was looked up to as the key writer of Scriptures (cf. 2 Pet. 3:15,16). They were the last books of the New Testament to be recognized as inspired writings by the church leaders and councils, and that late recognition also would explain why they were placed at the end of the list of New Testament books.

j. Hebrews and James are placed together because both are addressed to Hebrew Christians. If Paul wrote Hebrews it is interesting to observe that it is located next to the other Pauline epistles.

k. The last three epistles (2 John, 3 John, Jude) are short one-chapter books, which is one reason for their little exposure to the early church and hence their being placed near the end of the canon.

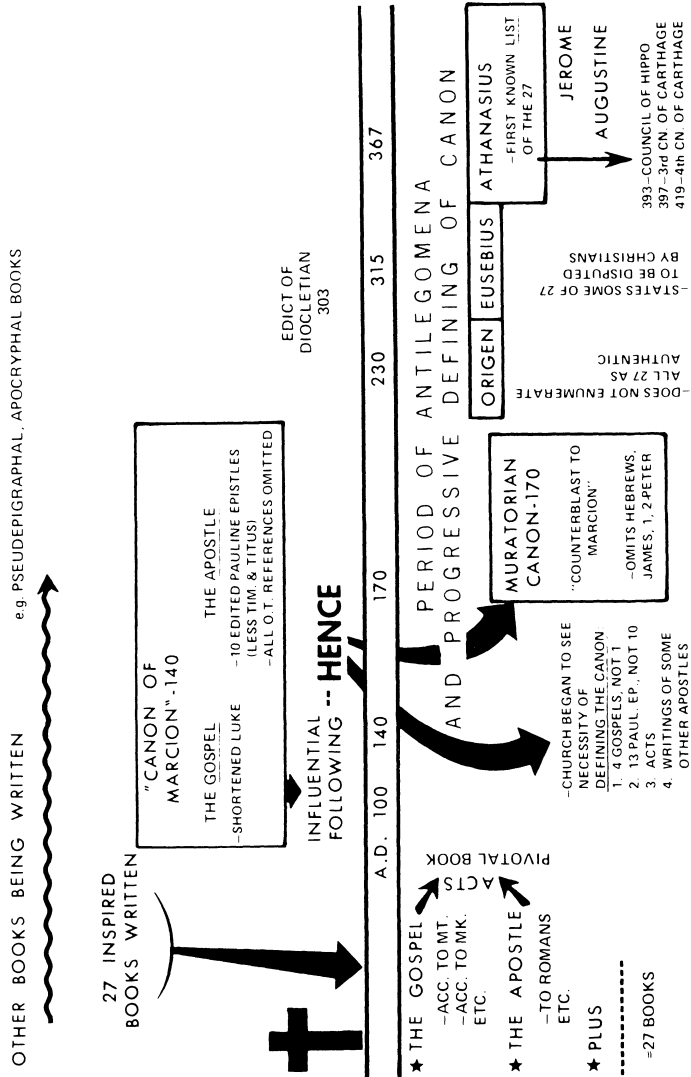
2. *Forming of the New Testament canon.* The original writing (composition) of each inspired New Testament book was one thing. The way all twenty-seven were brought together into one volume (canonization) was a different work of God, but no less supernatural. The sovereign hand of God was in the canonization as much as in the

17. If Paul wrote Hebrews, then he authored fourteen books.

18. There is a descending length in Paul's epistles, with one exception (Ephesians is longer than Galatians). It is unlikely that the order of so many books would be determined by mere length, however.

CHART 3

FORMING OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON



composition. If that were not so, an inspired book might have been excluded from the canon, and an uninspired book might have been included in the group. In fact, both of those threats hung over the church for a couple hundred years. For example, there were strong objections by some about accepting the following books (known as

antilegomena)¹⁹ as canonical: Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude and Revelation. At the same time, support was given by some church leaders to regard many other writings as Scripture, including books now within the Apocrypha²⁰ (e.g., 1 and 2 Maccabees, Tobit, Ecclesiasticus) and Pseudepigrapha²¹ (e.g., 1 and 2 Enoch, Martyrdom of Isaiah, Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs).

Study carefully the accompanying Chart 3 to learn the highlights of the gradual forming of the New Testament canon. Relate the following to the chart:

a. The twenty-seven inspired books were written in the period A.D. 45-95. During and after those years noninspired books were also being written.

b. The Gospel. The four gospels were brought together after the last one (John) was written, and they were called *The Gospel*.

c. The Apostle. In the same manner, the inspired writings of Paul "came together" soon after they were written, and they were identified under the one heading *The Apostle*.

d. Acts. Luke's Acts of the Apostles was early regarded by church leaders as a pivotal book, (the one that connected *The Gospel* with *The Apostle*), because it is the sequel to the gospel narrative and gives the historical background to the life and ministry of the apostle Paul.

e. Plus. The letters of other writers (Peter, James, Jude) and the Apocalypse of John (Revelation) were also recognized to bear divine authority.

f. We do not know when all twenty-seven (no more, and no less) books of the New Testament came together *for the first time* and were regarded by leaders of the Christian church as the completed canon of the second volume of Scripture. But whenever it was, the recognition was not once-and-for-all. Questions, objections, and disputes over the canon were to arise from within and from without the Christian communities. So the period A.D. 100-400 was one of *progressive defining* of the canon. Concerning some of the New Testament books, there were few or no questions regarding their divine authority. The antilegomena books were the major cause for the extended delay of consensus by the Christian church (Period of Antilegomena).

g. A few highlights of that period of defining the canon are shown

19. The word *antilegomena* means literally, "spoken against."

20. Apocrypha are noninspired writings regarded as canonical by some people.

21. Pseudepigrapha (literally, "false writings") are spurious writings whose authors sought canonical status for them. (This motive explains false authorship of the books.)

on Chart 3.²² Answer the following questions on the basis of the chart:

(1) The heretic Marcion rejected the Old Testament entirely and accepted what parts of the New Testament as authoritative?

(2) Marcion attracted a large group of followers to his view. His movement was stopped in the next decades in what two ways?²³

(3) Origen and Eusebius were prominent early church leaders. How did they regard the twenty-seven-book list?

(4) In A.D. 303 Emperor Diocletian issued the decree that all Christian Scriptures be destroyed. By that time there was general agreement on what constituted the New Testament canon. The persecution served to broadcast throughout the Empire just what the Christian Scriptures were.

(5) Whose is the first known list of the twenty-seven-book New Testament? What is its date? What other two theologians and three councils accepted the twenty-seven-book list?

From the middle of the fourth century onward the list of twenty-seven New Testament books was a fixed canon in the eyes of the Christian church. As noted earlier, the canon of twenty-seven books was divinely established from the beginning.

It is fair to ask, From the human standpoint who determined the extent of the New Testament canon? It is important to observe that the list is not the product of any single person or church council. The early church and the New Testament canon grew up together under the ministry of the Holy Spirit. F. F. Bruce writes, "We may well believe that those early Christians acted by a wisdom higher than their own in this matter, not only in what they accepted, but in what they rejected."²⁴ The Holy Spirit inspired individual writers to compose the original Scriptures, and then He gave discernment and guidelines to the believing community to recognize which books He had inspired.

F. TRANSLATIONS

The original autographs of the New Testament were written in Koine Greek, which was the vernacular of the entire Mediterranean world. If, during the succeeding centuries, translations had not been made into the languages of other nations of the world, converts of the

22. See F. F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments*, pages 104-13, for a concise description of that period.

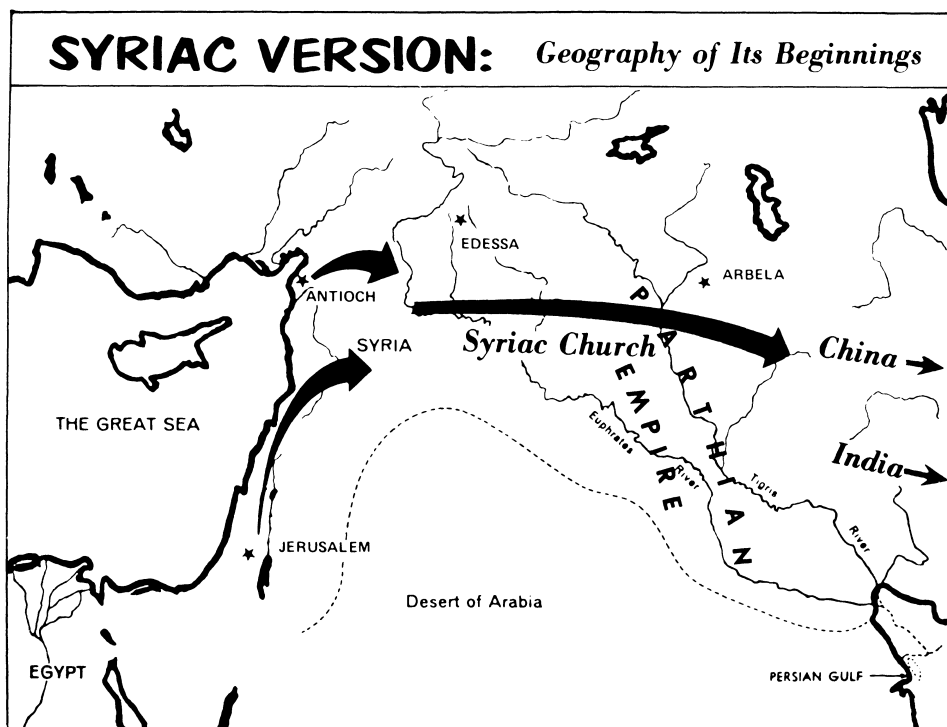
23. The Muratorian Canon was so named after L. A. Muratori, who discovered the manuscript of this ancient list.

24. F. F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments*, p. 113.

evangelistic crusades would not have had Scriptures to feed upon for their Christian growth, and the prophetic command of Acts 1:8 involving the ends of the earth would have remained an enigma. But, spurred on by the need for new Christians to have the written Word in their mother tongue, many translations were made during the next centuries. It was the natural outcome of Christianity's expansion to foreign lands via the spoken word.

1. *Ancient versions.* One of the key ancient versions was the Syriac Bible, which brought the written Word to lands east of Palestine — eventually to China and India.²⁵ (See accompanying Map A, Syriac Version.) Translations of the gospels and Acts were made as early as the second century, and by A.D. 425 a standard edition of the Bible (called Peshitta, literally "simple") was being used by the Christians.

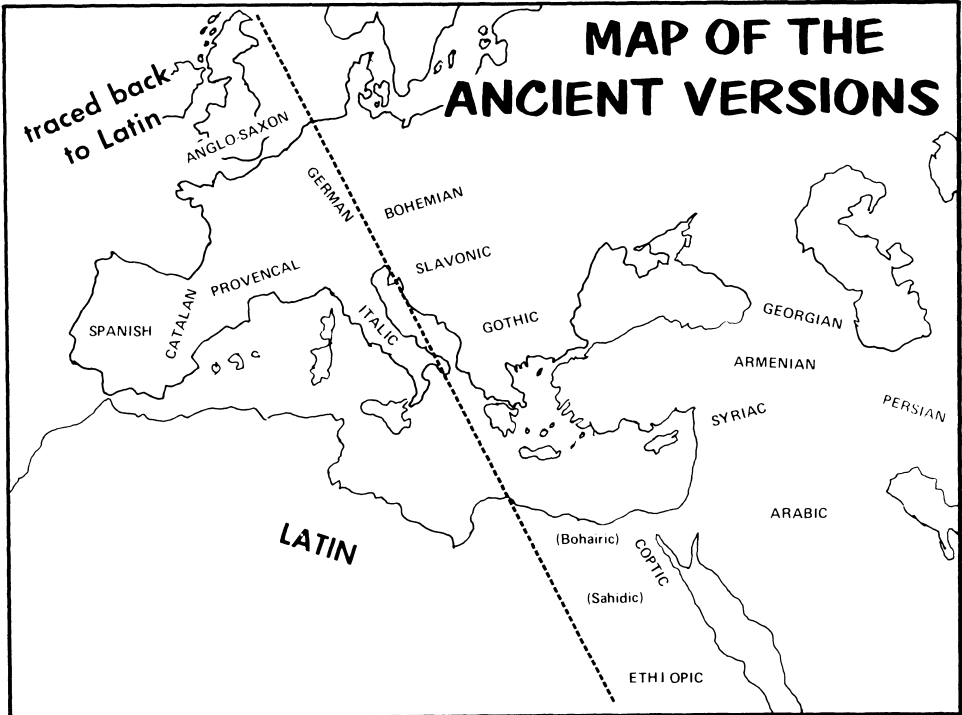
MAP A



25. The book of Acts records mainly the missionary labors in the west and northwest. It is interesting to observe that it was a Syrian church (at Antioch) which led that western movement (Acts 13:1 ff.). Yet the Syriac Bible served mainly the people who lived east and north of Palestine.

The Latin Vulgate was the most prominent of the ancient versions. It was the official Bible of Christendom in Europe for a thousand years. The earliest translations appeared in North Africa in the second century (Map B), and Jerome made his standard version during the years A.D. 383-405.²⁶

MAP B



Map B shows later European versions that are traced back to the Latin Bible. Those versions are west of the dashed line on the map. Note that the first English (Anglo-Saxon) Bible was based on the Latin version. Observe also on Map B the locations of other ancient versions of neighboring lands, which versions were not derived from the Latin. That phenomenon of active translation work in the early centuries after Christ is a testimony of the New Testament's universal attraction to the hearts of all people.

2. *English Bible.* The English Bible that you use for study has a long and fascinating history, which can be seen when the English text is traced back to its origins. You will appreciate your Bible more

26. Jerome translated the four gospels in A.D. 383, and during the next year he completed the remainder of the New Testament.

when you know the paths over which God has brought it to you. The next few pages are a survey of that history. Study it not just to learn facts of God’s program but to enhance your regard for the large variety of English versions, past and present.

a. The earliest versions. The Christian message reached Great Britain by the beginning of the fourth century A.D., when the Latin Bible was the people’s Scripture. When English became Britain’s new vernacular with the arrival of Germanic-speaking Angles, Saxons, and Jutes in the course of the fifth century, the need for English Scriptures arose. Chart 4 shows some of the main partial or complete English translations of the Bible that were made from about A.D. 700 to 1539. Note the three periods of the English language: *old*, *middle*, and *new*. The *new English* period extends from the time of the Reformation to the present.

CHART 4

EARLIEST VERSIONS OF THE ENGLISH BIBLE

	400	1100	1520
LATIN	OLD ENGLISH	MIDDLE ENGLISH	NEW ENGLISH
	<p>BEDE’S Bible poems c.700 John’s Gospel c.735</p> <p>Alfred the Great (d.901) —parts of the Bible</p> <p>Abbot Aelfric (10th cent.) —parts of O. T.</p> <p>Anglo Saxon Paraphrases 700-1000</p>	<p>ROLLE’S Psalter c.1300 Parts of N. T.</p> <p>2 WYCLIF VERSIONS 1380-84 (from Latin)</p> <p>1. Nicholas of Hereford —plus another? 2. John Purvey —rev. of Nicholas</p>	<p>TYNDALE’S VERSIONS N. T. 1525 - first printed Eng. N. T. Pent. 1530 Jonah 1531 Rev. Pent. and N. T. 1535 Rev. N. T. 1535</p> <p>COVERDALE’S BIBLE -1535 —first printed Eng. Bible</p> <p>MATTHEW’S BIBLE 1537 —by John Rogers —mixture of Tyn. and Cov.</p> <p>TAVERNER’S - 1539</p> <p>GREAT BIBLE —by Coverdale 1539</p> <p>Henry VIII: “In God’s name, let it go abroad among our people.”</p>

Note the active program of translation during the first decades of the *new English* period, including work by William Tyndale and Miles Coverdale. It was the Reformation that brought a revival of translation activity, spurred on by renewed interest in Hebrew and

CHART 5

KING JAMES VERSION

GREAT BIBLE 1539

QUEEN ELIZABETH
1558-1603

KING JAMES I
1603-1625

1560

1611

1700

GENEVA BIBLE

MOST POPULAR ENGLISH BIBLE

1620

last ed.
1644

- Shakespeare's Bible
- excels in accuracy

REFORMED

1560
Revision

BISHOPS' BIBLE

1568; 1572

- by Eng. bishops
- does not reach standard of Geneva Bible

ANGLICAN

HAMPTON COURT CONFERENCE 1604

- first suggestion by King James of a new translation
- without marginal notes

KING JAMES VERSION

- formal revision of Bishops' (1602 ed.)

-influence of Tyndale

1611

Greek Bible manuscripts, and by Gutenberg's invention of movable type for the printing press.

b. King James Version. The King James Version (KJV), also called the Authorized Version, was the outcome of much translation activity beginning with Tyndale (Chart 4). Scan Chart 5 and observe how it continues the survey of Chart 4. Note on Chart 5 the entry of the four major versions: Great Bible, Geneva Bible, Bishops' Bible, and King James Version.

The Geneva Bible excelled in accuracy and was very popular. It contained marginal notes with an interpretation of Reformed theology. For that reason it was rejected by the Church of England, and a new revision of the Great Bible, containing marginal notes of Anglican theology, was made by English bishops. That Bishops' Bible first appeared in 1568.

The tension and unrest over the two "competing" versions (Geneva and Bishops'), in addition to arguments over other versions, led King James I to call for a new version with no marginal notes of any theological interpretation. The version was made by fifty-four scholars over a period of seven years. It soon became the most popular English Bible, and it is still the most quoted and most memorized text. F. F. Bruce writes of it, "By sheer merit the Authorized Version established itself as The English Bible."²⁷

Two important values of the King James Version are its literal rendering and literary style, which strongly support analytical study.

c. English versions after the King James Version. The modern missions era of translation activity began around 1800. It is aptly called "modern" because the era has not yet ended. In fact, one of the brightest aspects of the Christian witness today is the unprecedented production of new Bible translations. Portions of Scripture are reaching people of many languages and cultures in the remotest parts of the world. And in America new English versions and paraphrases, written in contemporary style, are geared to such needy mission fields as homes without a church and campuses with drifting youth. For the serious Bible student who wants to analyze a Bible text that is virtually the same as the original (minus the translation factor), various excellent versions are available, such as the *New American Standard Bible* (NASB) and the *New International Version* (NIV).

Revision of Bible versions is an important activity of this modern era. The first major revision, known as the English Revised Version, appeared in 1881. It was a revision of the King James Version. Chart

27. F. F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments*, p. 229.

6 shows that and other highlights of the modern era. Use the chart to answer the following questions:

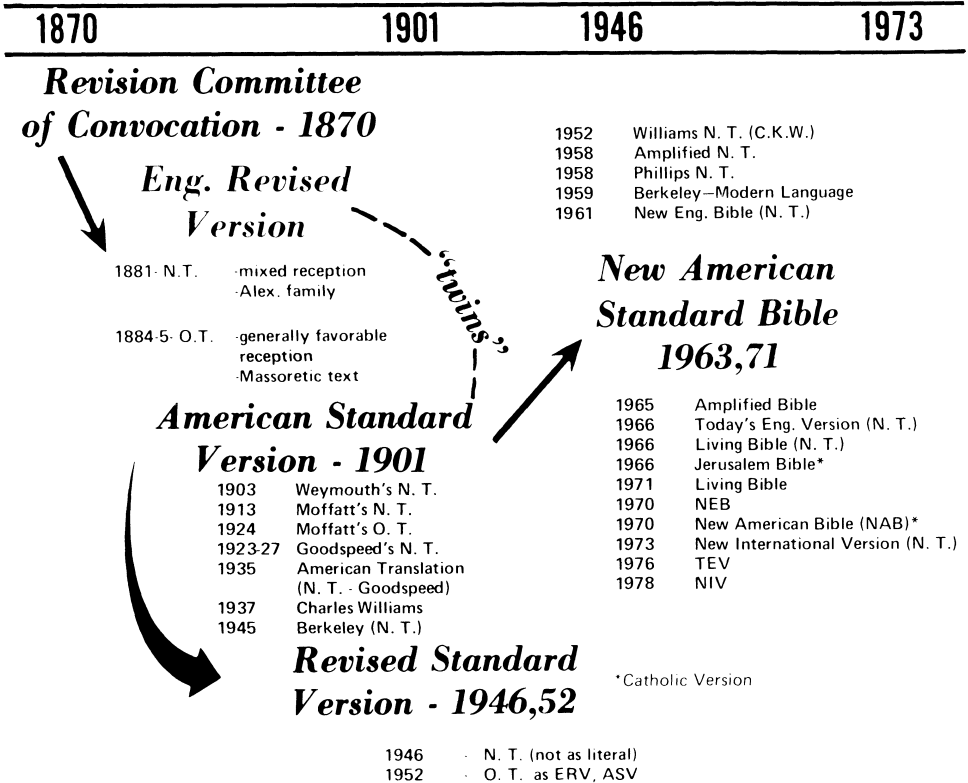
CHART 6

ENGLISH VERSIONS AFTER THE KING JAMES VERSION

KING JAMES (A.V.)

Reasons for a revision

1. Change of Eng. language since 1611
2. mss. discoveries
3. increased knowledge of Heb. and Greek



(1) The English Revised Version (RV) was a British revision of the King James Version. What were three main reasons for the revision?

(2) The American Standard Version (ASV) was a “twin” of the RV, produced for the American reader. The American and British committees collaborated in some of their work. How many years intervened between the KJV and ASV?

(3) The Revised Standard Version (RSV) was a revision of the ASV. What was the span of time between it and the ASV?

(4) The *New American Standard Bible* (NASB) was a revision of the ASV. When was the whole Bible in this revision first published?

(5) The *New International Version* (NIV) was a new translation. When was the whole Bible published?

(6) How many of the other versions on Chart 6 are you familiar with?

Thus, the Bible has come a long way — *from God to us*. And the most thrilling part of it all is that, not counting the necessary translation difference, “we hold in our hands to-day a Bible which differs in no substantial particular from the originals of the various books as they came from the hands of their authors.”²⁸

III. REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. In what ways is the New Testament related to the Old?
2. What were the main stages of the New Testament’s coming *from God to us*, beginning with *revelation*?
3. What is divine revelation? What is the difference between general revelation and special revelation?
4. How were the original Scriptures inspired by God? Were the original autographs inerrant?
5. Do we have any portion of the original autographs? Are the existing ancient copies of the Bible inerrant in every letter and word? If not, how confident can we be that they accurately represent what the authors originally wrote?
6. Were the four gospels the first New Testament books to be written? Which of these books was written after the other two: Ephesians, gospel according to John, Romans?
7. What is meant by canon of the New Testament? How was the extent of the canon determined?
8. Is there an order of progression in the books of the New Testament canon? If so, identify.
9. What is the approximate date of the first known twenty-seven-book canon?
10. What was the most important ancient version of the New Testament?

28. G. T. Manley, *The New Bible Handbook*, p. 19.

11. What ecclesiastical difference gave rise to the project of making the King James Version?

12. What is the difference between a free paraphrase and a literal translation?

13. The *New American Standard Bible* (NASB) is a revision of what version? Is the *New International Version* (NIV) a revision of a version?

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