

## BASIC FACTS ABOUT THE BIBLE

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*What is the real difference between the conservative and the liberal views of Scripture?*

The conservative takes the position that whenever Scripture gives an answer to any question, that answer is the ultimate touchstone of the truth, the final court of appeal for the reason. This is true whether the teaching of Scripture pertains to the sphere of history or of hamartiology (the doctrine of sin), of science or of soteriology (the doctrine of salvation). The Sermon on the Mount, to be sure, is inspired; but so is the Creation Account. The entire Bible is God-breathed. "For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21). Again, "All Scripture is God-breathed, and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16).

The real issue between faith and unbelief is this: Are these Scriptures the living oracle of God or are they not? Is it true or is it not true that men spoke from God being moved by the Holy Spirit? Is it correct or is it incorrect to say that *the entire Bible, as originally written*, is the Word of God, and that *all* of its teaching is trustworthy?

Today an attempt is being made to confuse the issue in order to make the position of faith look ridiculous. The question is asked again and again: "Is it not true that in the process of copying Bible manuscripts, translating them, and printing the translations, errors have been committed?" But who denies this plain fact? The edition of the King James Bible which was published in 1702 contained a very amusing error. In Psalm 119:161 the psalmist was made to complain: "*Printers* [instead of *Princes*] have persecuted me without a cause." But does anyone maintain that the Word of God has lost its infallible and normative character because a certain copyist, printer, proofreader, or translator erred? Does not everyone immediately realize that when we expose error of this character we are criticizing *the work of men*, not *the Word of God*?

*In what sense is it true that the Bible is inspired?*

The Bible is God-breathed. Its human authors were powerfully guided and directed by the Holy Spirit. As a result, what they wrote was not only without error but also of supreme value for man. It is all that God wanted it to be. It constitutes the infallible rule of faith and practice for mankind.

The Spirit, however, did not suppress the personality of the writer but raised it to a higher level of activity (John 14:26). And because the individuality of the human author was not destroyed, we find in Scripture a wide variety of style and language. There is a vast difference between the deeply emotional tenor of Hosea and the vividly descriptive manner of expression which characterizes Nahum; between the exhortations of Haggai and Hebrews, and the argumentations of Malachi and Galatians. Nevertheless, all are equally the Word of God. Inspiration, moreover, should never be considered in separation

from those many activities which served to bring the human author upon the scene of history. By causing him to be born at a certain time and place, bestowing upon him specific endowments, equipping him with a definite kind of education, causing him to undergo predetermined experiences, and bringing back to his mind certain facts and their implications, the Spirit prepared his human consciousness. Next, the same Spirit, moved him to write. Finally, during the process of writing, that same Primary Author, in a thoroughly organic connection with all his preceding activity, suggested to the mind of the human author that language (the very words) and that style, which would be the most appropriate vehicle for the interpretation of the divine ideas for people of every rank and position, age and race. Hence, though every word is truly the word of the human author, it is even more truly the Word of God.

*How did the Sacred Writings look originally and how did they develop into our Bible?*

The original manuscripts (MSS.) of the Bible, the autographs, have all perished. Although this fact can be easily explained, we do well, nevertheless, to see in this an evidence of God's special care or providence. If we, today, were in possession of these original documents, we would almost certainly consider them objects of veneration and worship, just as in the days of Hezekiah the Israelites burned incense to the brazen serpent (2 Kings 18:4).

How did a Bible book look as it came from the "pen" (i.e., pointed reed, Jeremiah 8:8) of the author? The laws, prophecies, etc., of the Old Testament were written in ink (Jeremiah 36:18), on skins prepared for writing and rolled up into a scroll (Psalm 40:7; Jeremiah 36:14ff; Ezekiel 2:9; Zechariah 5:1). They were written in the Hebrew language (Phoenician script which was later changed to Aramaic script), with the exception of Ezra 4:8-6:18; 7:12-26; Jeremiah 10:11; and Daniel 2:4-7:28, which are in the Aramaic tongue. Only consonants were used. Not until a much later time – probably about seven centuries after the birth of Christ – were the vowels written into the text. This was done by the Masorites, Jewish scholars.

The New Testament Scriptures were probably written on papyrus rolls, varying in size with the length of the written composition. The papyrus is a tall sedge which grows near the Sea of Galilee and Lake Merom. Formerly, it flourished near the Nile. The Egyptians used it in the manufacture of shoes, boats, baskets, etc. The pith of the papyrus was cut into thin, flat strips, six or seven inches in length. These would be laid at right angles to the side of a table until there were as many as needed. Then a thick paste or glue would be applied, and other strips would be laid crosswise and pressed. Thus, the papyrus sheet was produced. Several sheets attached to one another would form a roll. We owe the preservation of many papyri to the dry climate of Egypt. A papyrus scrap (7Q) of Mark 6:52, 53 has been assigned a date of approximately A.D. 50. Another papyrus containing verses from the eighteenth chapter of John probably dates from the first part of the second century A.D.

The autographs did not last forever. Copies had to be made, both of the Old Testament and the New Testament writings. And all this work had to be done by hand,

for the art of printing had not yet been invented. Moreover, in the course of time, the sacred writings (the originals) began to multiply. Hence, they were collected and arranged in a certain order. This, too, was not done in a day. The various laws of Moses were assembled into the “book of the law” (Joshua 1:7,8; 1 Kings 2:3; 2 Kings 14:6; 2 Chronicles 25:4; 34:30, 31; Ezra 7:6; Nehemiah 8:2, 15; 13:1ff). The prophecies, too, were collected (Isaiah 34:16; Daniel 9:2). And so were the Psalms; there were collections of the Psalm of David, Psalms of Asaph, Psalms of Korah, etc. In 2 Maccabees 2:13,14, we read:

*Nehemiah...founding a library, gathered together the books about the kings and prophets, and the books of David, and letters of kings about sacred gifts (such as Ezra 6:6-12?). And in like manner Judas also gathered together for us all those writings that had been scattered by reason of the war that befell, and they are with us.*

In the new dispensation the Old Testament scrolls were viewed as a unity. Thus, in 2 Corinthians 3:14, mention is made of “the reading of the Old Testament”. Similarly, about A.D. 100, the four Gospels were viewed as a unity; and so were the epistles of Paul. About the middle of the second century it had become clear to the church that these two (Gospels and “Paul”) belonged together. About the year 200, the unity of the entire New Testament – in fact, of the entire Bible – was beginning to become apparent. Moreover, when sometime during the second or third century, the *book* began to replace the *scroll*, and what was formerly written on *many* separate scrolls could now be written in *one* far more practicable book, visible expression was given to the unity of Old and New Testament. A few of these very ancient Bibles have been discovered. None of them is in perfect condition: leaves are missing from all of them. Their Old Testament is some form of the Old *Greek* or Septuagint (LXX) translation. Their New Testament, of course, is also in Greek. Codex D, however, contains, in addition, a Latin translation. These ancient capital-letter MSS, are called *uncials*. In the oldest uncials, the words are not separated. As to chapter divisions, in 1228 Stephen Langton divided the Bible into chapters. The division of the New Testament into verses was accomplished by Robert Stephens in 1551. The Masorites had previously divided the Old Testament into verses. While this division has its advantages, it also has disadvantages. Today the tendency is to give more prominence to paragraph division than to verse division. An excellent example of this new tendency is to be found in the New Testament, Revised Standard Version. The following five uncials are among the most famous:

1. B – the Vatican MS., dating from the fourth century A.D.
2. Aleph (The first letter of the Hebrew alphabet – the Sinaitic MS., discovered by C. Tischendorf in the convent of St. Catherine, Mt. Sinai. This uncial also dated from the fourth century.
3. A – the Alendrian MS., fifth century.
4. C – the Ephraem MS., fifth century. Ephraem the Syrian, living in the seventh century A.D., covered up the sacred text with his own sermon or treatise. Someone has remarked that this was not the only time when a sermon served the purpose of blotting out the text. Most of the original, has, however, been recovered.

5. D – the MS. Of Beza, fifth or sixth century.

About the ninth century the cursives – MSS. in small, running hand, and with division of words – began to replace the uncials. For a while, uncials and cursives existed side by side. Finally, the uncials disappeared.

The Masorites, those Jewish scholars who flourished between the destruction of Jerusalem and the tenth century, but whose activity, in its most comprehensive sense, antedates the period of the Maccabees and extends to the year 1425, exercised great care in copying. They counted the very letters of their copy, comparing everything with the text before them. The detection of a single mistake was often held to be a significant reason for destroying an entire copy and making a new beginning. Scholars, however, in trying to determine the original reading of the Old Testament do not depend solely upon the Masoretic text and notes, but also make use of the following: the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Targums (Aramaic), the Septuagint or Old Greek version, the later Greek versions (by Aquila, Theodotion, Symmachus), the Latin Vulgate, and the Syriac Peshitta.

The Old Testament which we read today was the one recognized by our Lord; i.e., it contained the same books. The arrangement of the books was different. In all probability for Jesus, Chronicles was the last Old Testament “book.” It is in this book (2 Chronicles 24:21), that the murder of Zechariah is mentioned. In Matthew 23:35, Jesus is quoted as saying: “And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.” Notice: “from Abel...to Zechariah, son of Berekiah.” Why does Jesus phrase it thus? That He does not have in mind a purely chronological order is apparent from the fact that the murder of Uriah, son of Shemaiah, was later than that of Zechariah. The only reasonable explanation is that the Lord was referring to all the righteous blood shed on earth from the murder mentioned in the very first book (Genesis) to the one recorded in the very last book (Chronicles). It is true that in Christ’s day the Old Testament was written not in one book but on several scrolls. This however, does not cancel the fact that the scrolls were so arranged that Genesis was viewed as being first, and Chronicles last.

While we have a uniform Old Testament text, so that, as was noted above, the work of Old Testament textual criticism consists in the comparison of this uniform text with various translations, the case is entirely different with the text of the New Testament. The Greek text of the New Testament is not the same in the many MSS. which have come down to us. We are even able to distinguish manuscript families. Nevertheless, only about a thousandth part of the New Testament presents “substantial variation,” i.e., variation which really alters the sense of the passage. It is on this thousandth part that the labors of the New Testament textual criticism has been largely expended, with excellent results. God, in his kind providence, has guarded his Word in such a manner that we can say, without fear of successful contradiction, that today we have an Old as well as a New Testament which is as substantially as it was when it came

forth from the pen of the inspired writers. The way of salvation is clearly revealed in every Bible, whether written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, or in English.

The word *Bible* is derived from the Greek *Biblia*, which means books. But the many “books” have become one book, the best book of all.

*Why do we not include the Apocryphal books in our Bible?*

The Apocryphal – i.e., hidden; of unknown origin, spurious, uncanonical – books consist of the surplus of the Septuagint over the Hebrew Old Testament. The Roman Catholic Church, through the Council of Trent, in the year 1546, declared the following apocryphal books to be canonical: Tobit, Judith, The Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus (i.e., the Wisdom of Jesus, the Son of Sirach), Baruch, and 1 and 2 Maccabees. The same Council also added the Rest of Esther to the canonical Esther, and incorporated the History of Susanna, The Song of the Three Holy Children, and Bel and the Dragon, with Daniel. We maintain, however, that these books are not to be regarded as inspired Scripture. Observe the following:

1. *They are not found in the original, i.e., Hebrew, Old Testament.* In the words of Flavius Josephus, the famous Jewish historian, who was a contemporary of the apostle Paul:

*For it is not the case with us to have vast numbers of books disagreeing and conflicting with one another. We have but twenty-two, containing the history of all time, books that are justly believed in., But what faith we have placed in our own writings is evident by our conduct; for though so great an interval of time (i.e., since they were written) has now passed, not a soul has ventured either to add, or to remove, or to alter a syllable. But it is instinctive in all Jews at once from their very birth to regard them as commands of God and to abide by them, and, if need be, willingly to die for them.*

The twenty-two books which Josephus has in mind are the following:

- a. Five of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy.
- b. Thirteen Prophets: Joshua, Judges and Ruth (taken as one), Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Lamentations (as one), Ezekiel, the twelve Minor Prophets (as one), Daniel, Job, Esther, Ezra and Nehemiah (as one), and Chronicles.
- c. Four Hymns to God and practical precepts: Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, and Ecclesiastes.

Josephus clearly did not recognize any Apocryphal book as being on par with the twenty-two.

2. *They are never quoted by our Lord;* in fact, it is almost certain that they are never quoted in the entire New Testament.

3. *Some of the authors of these Apocryphal books disclaim inspiration.* See the Prologue to The Wisdom of Jesus, the Son of Sirach; also 2 Maccabees 2:23; 15:38.

4. The fact that the Apocryphal books were read in the churches must be interpreted in the light of the statement of Jerome:

*As therefore the Church reads the books of Judith, Tobit, and Maccabees but does not receive them among the canonical Scriptures, so it also reads these two volumes (Wisdom of Solomon, and Wisdom of Jesus, the Son of Sirach) for the edification of the people, but not for authority to prove the doctrines of religion.*

5. The quality of the material contained in these writings, though varying greatly in worth, ranks far below that of the canonical books.

*Is it true that we believe these sixty-six books to be the authoritative Word of God, because long ago the church officially declared them to be such?*

From the Prologue to the Wisdom of Jesus, the Son of Sirach (also called Ecclesiasticus), which, like 1 Maccabees, is one of the best of the Apocryphal writings, there are those who conclude that already in the year 290 B.C. the Canon of the Old Testament had become fixed. This was not long after 336 B.C., the approximate date when the last book of the Old Testament had been completed.

As to the books of the New Testament, in the year 367 Athanasius prepared a list of twenty-seven books, the identical twenty-seven which constitute our New Testament. The Council of Hippo, 393, and of Carthage, 397, confessed the canonical character of these same twenty-seven books. We have already seen that the Protestant Reformation, on very solid grounds, rejected the Roman Catholic Old Testament list which included the Apocryphal writings, and returned to the original Hebrew Canon. This, however, did not mean that the church or some ecclesiastical assembly decided or made the Canon. What the church actually did was to confess before the world that which had long been the conviction of believers.

It is not because the church upon a certain date, long ago, made an official decision, that these sixty-six books constitute the inspired Bible. On the contrary, it is because God's people had long since accepted these books as the very Word of God that the church finally made this official declaration before the world. The sixty-six books, by their very contents, immediately attest themselves to the hearts of God's children as being the living oracles of God. The official declaration is necessary to guard against all heresy and misunderstanding, and to make a public confession before the world.

*In recent years what important discoveries have been made?*

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls (Qumran Scrolls), dating back to the first century A.D., has shown that the text of the Old Testament – the Masoretic text – has come down to us substantially intact. The most ancient Hebrew Old Testament which has been discovered dates from about the tenth century A.D.

