HANDBOOK FOR PERSONAL BIBLE STUDY

2nd edition

WILLIAM W. KLEIN

A NavPress Discipleship Resource

There's nothing more exciting than seeing a person become interested—really interested—in the Bible for the first time. But getting started in a relationship with God through his Word can easily become frustrating and overwhelming. In *Handbook for Personal Bible Study*, William Klein gives us a concise, relatable field guide to the foundational purpose and practice of Bible study. Every pastor, disciplemaker, and new Christian will benefit from having this book on their shelf.

REV. NICOLE UNICE, pastor, host of *How to Study the Bible* podcast, and author of *Help! My Bible Is Alive!*

The Bible was written for us, but it wasn't written to us. Though we readily understand we're not Israelites living thousands of years ago, we commonly forget this important fact . . . and because of it, studying the Scriptures can feel daunting and confusing. Thankfully, books like the *Handbook for Personal Bible Study* give us tools to dive in without our eyes glazing over and our heads spinning. From understanding why various versions are translated (and for what purpose) to learning to delve into the ever-important historical and cultural background surrounding a passage, Klein gives us insight and methods to live a life of wisdom that isn't spoon-fed to us from others but given straight from the Bible itself.

TERESA SWANSTROM ANDERSON, author of the Get Wisdom Bible Study series

HANDBOOK FOR PERSONAL BIBLE STUDY

2nd edition

WILLIAM W. KLEIN

NavPress®

A NavPress resource published in alliance with Tyndale House Publishers

NavPress is the publishing ministry of The Navigators, an international Christian organization and leader in personal spiritual development. NavPress is committed to helping people grow spiritually and enjoy lives of meaning and hope through personal and group resources that are biblically rooted, culturally relevant, and highly practical.

For more information, visit NavPress.com.

Handbook for Personal Bible Study

A NavPress resource published in alliance with Tyndale House Publishers.

The Team: David Zimmerman, Acquisitions Editor; Deborah Howell, Copy Editor; Olivia Eldredge, Operations Manager; Julie Chen, Designer

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Tyndale House Publishers at csresponse@tyndale.com, or call 1-855-277-9400.

ISBN 978-1-64158-268-1

Printed in the United States of America

27 26 25 24 23 22 21
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CONTENTS

Preface

The Bible has always occupied a central place in my life. When I was growing up, my parents were members of churches that preached and taught the Bible. At the early age of seven, I decided to follow Jesus myself—with the encouragement of a children's Bible teacher. My mother was an outstanding lay Bible scholar, effectively teaching children and adults throughout her life in the days when conservative churches didn't always encourage women to be teachers.

I took Bible courses in college and attended seminary after that. Upon graduation with a master of divinity degree, I served on the staff of a large church in California. Teaching the Bible became the central focus of my ministry. At first, among other pastoral duties, I taught classes and led small-group Bible studies for college students, single adults, and young couples. Then, as minister of evangelism and discipleship, I focused more exclusively on teaching and overseeing small groups for the entire church. I recruited and trained many small-group Bible study leaders over several years. I developed curricula and Bible studies. The teaching bug really bit me!

I then acquired a PhD in New Testament exegesis and have been teaching courses related to the New Testament ever since. That has included courses in biblical interpretation and Greek exegesis, as well as courses that surveyed the New Testament or focused on specific books within it. In addition to teaching undergraduate and graduate courses, I remain strongly committed to the local church, and I've had many opportunities to teach classes and lead Bible studies of various kinds throughout the years.

I'm telling you this bit of personal history not to call attention to myself

in some narcissistic way, but to emphasize this point: God has blessed my life with profound and life-giving connections to Scripture. I've come to deeply value the study of God's Word. It has the power to transform lives. I've seen it happen repeatedly—in my own life and in the lives of others.

Why study the Scriptures? With great insight, the writer of Hebrews penned these words: "For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (4:12). While this text does not limit God's "word" to the Bible, certainly we can hear God speaking through it. Not only can God's Word discern who we are, but God can use it to transform us to become what God intends us to be. As the apostle Paul put it, "Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another—showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God's way. Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us" (2 Tim 3:16-17, MSG). What a resource! God has given us a great treasure in Scripture. Who wouldn't want to be a student of the Bible?

In addition to the printed page, now we're blessed to have all types of new and convenient ways to access the Bible. In the kitchen or at the office, with a laptop, tablet, phone, or desktop computer, we have many programs and websites that put Scriptures on our screens and allow for all kinds of study. In church, when a preacher or teacher says, "Open up your Bibles," many pick up their phones or tablets to find the text ("Turn on your Bible app!"). These electronic devices enable us to access Scripture from planes, coffee shops, or park benches—and we can shove them back into our pocket, backpack, or purse when we're finished.

I'm certainly not saying that God limits his working in the world to the Bible and to those who have access to it. However, the Bible serves as the centerpiece of God's special revelation. We're blessed to have God's Word, and when we engage it seriously, God accomplishes extraordinary things! My fondest hope is that this *Handbook for Personal Bible Study*, now in this second and revised edition, will encourage many people to embrace the Bible, for the first time or perhaps in new ways, as God's living and active message to them. That's my hope and prayer for *you*—that your reading and studying of God's Word will enable you to encounter the living God in both fresh and profound ways.

Acknowledgments

I WANT TO THANK AND ACKNOWLEDGE several people for their roles in bringing me to a love for Scripture and its Author. These individuals set me on a course that enables me to write this book. My parents, William and Eleanor Klein, were committed to the Bible, and my mother modeled serious study from my earliest days. Sadly, I don't know the name of the woman who led me to "take Jesus as my Savior," but I thank her for helping me to make that decision and for giving me my first copy of the New Testament. Dr. Charles W. Anderson, my pastor during my teen years, helped me see how vital and life-changing Scripture can be. These people, along with faithful Sunday school teachers and youth leaders, laid a sure foundation for my life.

My love for and competence in the Scriptures was abetted by courses in the Bible and the biblical languages that I took at Wheaton College and Denver Seminary. Special mention goes to Dr. Gerald Hawthorne at Wheaton and Dr. Donald Burdick at Denver. They were inspiring teachers who modeled that profession for me. Thanks also to many people who've given me the privilege to teach or lead them in Bible studies in churches, campus groups, and other venues.

I acknowledge the contributions of many generations of students I have taught at Denver Seminary. In both New Testament courses and my every-semester course in biblical interpretation, I had the privilege of seeing their love for Scripture grow and their competence in Bible analysis and exegesis blossom. What an encouragement to me, and a source of hope for the future of Christian witness in the world!

I also acknowledge the support of Kent Wilson of NavPress, who initially pursued me to undertake the first edition of this project, and publisher Don Pape, who expressed enough enthusiasm for the book to warrant a second edition. Affirming the Navigators' long history of commitment to Bible study and publishing Bible study aids (some of which are reflected in these pages), these publishers wanted to place in one volume resources that would help and encourage people to continue that crucial pursuit. In addition, I want to acknowledge the efforts of two editors. In the first edition, Brad Lewis helped convert my sometimes elevated or obtuse prose into more readable sentences. For this revised edition, David Zimmerman's suggestions helped me streamline the work into this more useful form, and Deborah Howell did a superb job as copy editor. Their observations were always astute and helped focus my attention to the needs of readers today.

Finally, I acknowledge the constant encouragement of my dear wife, Phyllis. Her spiritual strength and vitality are sustaining graces in my spiritual journey. She is a loving mother and grandmother. She supports many others through her friendships and her ministry of spiritual direction. Her commitment to prayer and cultivating the life with God inspire my own (often-too-feeble) efforts.

William W. Klein
Columbine Valley, Colorado

Introduction

Perhaps you've seen books on "how to study the Bible" in bookstores or online booksellers, and perhaps you even have some on your own shelves. Some provide theoretical help in the task of understanding God's Word, while others strive to be practical and hands-on. Some pastors write from their perspectives in the church, while others instruct readers from their vantage points in various parachurch ministries or academic institutions. Many of them are excellent, helpful, and encouraging.

So why do I presume to write yet another book to add to the stack? While other authors address specific elements to help Christians study the Bible, no one provides the scope of coverage that I'm offering here. Of course, it easily could have been much larger. Still, you'll find that it covers more territory than most books that provide specific and more limited instruction on how to study the Bible.

Let me highlight several features that motivated my writing. Most Christians need encouragement to persevere in their engagement with the Bible. While we want to understand *why* the Bible is important for our lives, we also want and need practical and concrete help on *how* to conduct our study—and to keep at it. Because we all come in different shapes and sizes (culture, gender, race, denomination, and other factors), because we have been on the journey for longer or shorter times, and because we're more or less familiar with the Bible and the Christian faith, we need different approaches and tactics that will serve us well. Furthermore, those approaches and tactics might need to change as our faith grows and as time in our schedules allows.

While no one book can supply everything you might want or need for studying the Bible, my goal is to provide as much help as possible within a reasonably sized volume. Here is a book that individuals can use profitably on their own, and that small groups could also find useful to answer specific questions before they go too far into their study. I've designed it to be practical and readable while not "talking down" to anyone. It portrays the best tactics for understanding the Bible and gives readers suggestions to study specific issues in more depth on their own.

All of this means that you might read some sections or chapters only once but return to other parts repeatedly as you seek more help or further insight, or to refresh your memory about certain ideas. You'll discover a bit of overlap in several chapters, as I need to say similar things in different ways or from different perspectives. If you find that some concepts seem familiar, you can skim through those rapidly until you encounter new territory. I might cover some points briefly in one place and then in more detail in another. You can return to the fuller explanation if you need a refresher.

So, what does the book include? Let's briefly look at what each chapter contains.

Chapter 1 sets the stage for reading and studying the Bible. It helps us understand the nature of the Bible and how it came to us by way of the ancient Hebrew and early Christian communities. We also answer questions such as: Why do we have so many versions and translations available today? Can we trust some or all of them? And why do some Christian groups but not others include the Apocrypha in their Bibles?

Chapter 2 points us to our need to take in the message of the Bible and includes some basic tactics we can use to accomplish that goal. We supply initial simple and practical steps for each of the following: hearing, reading, memorizing, meditating on, and contemplating the Word. At this point you are ready to enjoy fruitful times of Bible study. Yet I hope these steps whet your appetite for what's to come. They set the stage for fuller explanations and more focused tactics in later chapters.

Chapter 3 covers the crucial issue of *interpretation*. An authoritative text is of little value if we don't understand how to interpret it. So, after tracing briefly how the Bible has been interpreted in history, this chapter provides some general principles of interpretation, as well as specific tactics for interpreting the Bible's various genres in both Testaments.

Chapter 4 supplies a brief survey of the cultural and historical settings

in which the Bible emerged. What was it like to live in Old Testament times? We survey the history of ancient Israel. What else was going on in the world? What do we need to know about the four hundred or so years between the close of the Old Testament and the arrival of the Messiah? What light does that intertestamental period shed on our understanding of the New Testament? And what was it like in the Roman world into which Jesus and his church were born?

Chapter 5 introduces essential elements of Bible study that lay a foundation for later chapters. We must think through our goals in Bible study. We need to understand ourselves and what we bring to the task of Bible study: presuppositions and preunderstandings. In addition, we tackle the central steps in Bible study: observation, interpretation, and application, reinforcing some issues we introduced earlier.

Chapter 6 presents several practical methods of Bible study. Here are some useful how-tos. You can accomplish some of them in one sitting, while others are more extended. Most of us need variety to keep our study of Scripture fresh and invigorating, so using different methods at various times is crucial.

Chapter 7 continues this catalog of methods but adds some that are more in-depth or extensive. There are times when you might want to engage in studies that span many weeks or even months.

Chapter 8 compiles some essential ways we employ the Bible in our lives and Christian communities. Throughout the book I stress the need for personal application of the Bible's message. But this chapter discusses using the Bible for worship, liturgy, theology, communicating the Word (teaching, preaching, and leading Bible studies), pastoral care and counseling, and spiritual formation.

Chapter 9, finally, provides my "parting shot" as author and encourager. I hope to instill in you a fond love for God's Word, since it comes from the heart of the God who loves us. I want to encourage you to do whatever it takes to make your encounters with the Bible a source of joy and profit. Our goal—one I try to stress not only in this chapter but throughout the book—isn't just studying the Bible; our goal is to love God and our neighbors as Jesus himself insisted (see Luke 10:27). The Bible provides a vital means to reach that goal, so I hope you'll keep at it.

Finally, the appendix provides help in selecting the best resources to aid readers in the various tasks suggested in the book. There you will find resources that will give more depth than you have found in this book. I will

provide some helpful principles for identifying resources that will support and inform your study.

Now you simply need to read the rest of this book. Perhaps, more importantly, you need to pick up and read The Book! I love the eloquent and truthful words recorded in Martin Luther's *Table Talk*:[1]

> The Holy Scripture is the highest and best of books, abounding in comfort under all afflictions and trials. It teaches us to see, to feel, to grasp, and to comprehend faith, hope, and charity, far otherwise than mere human reason can; and when evil oppresses us, it teaches how these virtues throw light upon the darkness, and how, after this poor, miserable existence of ours on earth, there is another and an eternal life.

May God enrich your life immeasurably as you read and study his Word. To him be glory forever and ever. Amen.

PART ONE

THE BIBLE

CHAPTER 1

HOW THE BIBLE CAME TO US

Have you ever wondered how a book written by many authors, mostly unknown, over the course of so many centuries, in three different languages, and to a diverse group of people and cultures who lived a long time ago could become the world's bestselling book of all time? Why does this book occupy such a crucial place in history?

Of course, I'm speaking of the Bible.

All branches of the Christian church—whether Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, or any subgroup—agree that the Bible is foundational to what they believe and how they practice the Christian faith. Indeed, because of Scripture's pivotal role and so that God's people can easily access its contents, the Bible has been carefully preserved throughout centuries and translated into hundreds of languages over the course of its history.

Yet it's important to ask whether such a diverse collection of writings speaks with one voice, several harmonious voices, or many discordant voices. Also, can such a collection speak authoritatively today?

Before we get too far along, we need to ask precisely *what* Scripture is. How many books make up the Bible, and what are they? After all, the

branches of the church previously mentioned don't always agree. And while we're thinking about the origin and makeup of the Bible, we need to ask how we can be sure that what we have before us in our many modern versions adequately represents what the ancient authors intended to say.

The Nature of the Bible

If a police officer or a representative of your local court system came to your door to deliver a subpoena, you'd be legally obligated to appear in court as directed. If you ignored the summons, you'd find yourself in contempt of court. While a subpoena is just a piece of paper, the weight of the whole legal system and the entire rule of law stands behind that simple document.

What kind of weight does the Bible carry? Why do Christians hold it in such regard? What is the nature of the authority behind the Bible? Or perhaps more simply, what do Christians believe about the nature of the book (or collection of books) we call the Bible?

Once we come to terms with these kinds of questions, we can decide what role the Bible will play in our own lives. Will we study it? How seriously? Will we obey its teachings or merely treat them as ideas that we'll weigh against our own opinions or the advice of others? Will the Bible's words guide how we live, how we think, and what we believe?

Let's look at these issues in four sections: revelation and inspiration, the role of the Bible's human authors, the authority of the Bible, and unity and diversity in the Bible.

Revelation and Inspiration

Christians have always defended a central belief about the nature of the Bible: It owes its origin to God. The Bible is God's disclosure and revelation of himself. While composed by human writers, the contents of the Bible are divinely inspired.

The Old Testament (OT) frequently includes language such as, "The Lord says . . ." to reflect the author's view that the words following that phrase come directly from God (out of numerous examples, see Gen 22:16; 1 Sam 10:18; Ps 12:5; Isa 10:24).

In the New Testament (NT), the apostle Paul reflected on the phenomenon of God speaking words through human authors, noting that the OT writings were "inspired" or "God-breathed" (2 Tim 3:16). While

emphasizing the same point, the apostle Peter used a different image: The Holy Spirit "carried along" the writers of the OT (see 2 Pet 1:20-21) so that what resulted wasn't merely what human authors wanted to say but what God desired to communicate. In addition, NT authors regularly referred to texts from the OT as support for claims or proof of their arguments (see, for example, Matt 1:23; Acts 2:17; Rom 12:19; Heb 10:16). Both OT and NT writers were conscious of God's role in speaking his words through human speakers and writers.

What early Christians saw as true for the OT led to the eventual formation of the NT. By the time Peter wrote his second letter, he claimed that at least some of Paul's letters were equal to the OT—the "other Scriptures" (2 Pet 3:16). Paul wrote explicitly that the origin of his teaching was the same as the origin of the OT, namely, the Holy Spirit (see 1 Cor 2:13). In some of Paul's judgments, he was conscious of God's Spirit at work (see 1 Cor 7:40). And the apostle John thought his writing embodied "the true words of God" (Rev 19:9).

By the end of the fourth century, Christians settled on a Bible that gave equal status to the Hebrew Scriptures and twenty-seven Christian writings from the first century. We'll address the issue of the Canon in more detail later in the book.

Human Authors

While some people might question the Bible's divine origin, almost no one questions that humans wrote the words of Scripture over a span of many centuries. If we accept that the Bible is a divinely inspired document, how did so many people write it over hundreds of years? We might not understand the process that took place, but it seems clear that God oversaw the writers' efforts so that they wrote precisely what God wanted to convey to his people. Again, although some writers of Scripture acknowledged God's activity in the process (see 1 Cor 2:13; 7:40; Rev 19:9), the biblical writers rarely declared God's role in directly writing Scripture.

Despite the lack of awareness by Scripture's human authors that they were penning God's Word, the Holy Spirit certainly knew that's what they were doing. So, Scripture possesses this unique quality: It expresses both the human and divine authors' purposes at the same time. As a result, we believers can hear God's voice in the words of the Bible—words written by people like us—and we can embrace them confidently.

Authority of the Bible

Remember that subpoena mentioned earlier? If you're required to respond to this court order because the authority of the state lies behind it, how much more weight do God's words carry? The writer of Hebrews argued, "We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. For since the message spoken through angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation?" (Heb 2:1-3).

Let's break that down. The writer argues that if OT Law, which was mediated by angels, demanded punishment for Law breakers, it would be even more serious to ignore or violate a message from God himself—especially one mediated by his Son, Jesus Christ, and confirmed by signs and wonders! The author here speaks of the message of salvation in Christ. But equally, since the message of the Bible is God's message, and if God seeks to speak to his people as they encounter the words of Scripture, then that message carries God's authority.

With their ample use of the OT, the writers of the NT clearly viewed the OT as the words of God, which were authoritative for them and their readers. Jesus also affirmed the total authority of the OT, stating that "the Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35, NKJV).

If we choose to ignore the Bible's message, our ignorance doesn't negate Scripture's authority or our accountability to it. Even our legal codes assume that ignorance of the law is no excuse. When we ignore the Bible, we risk missing both its benefits and its warnings. How crucial then is our obligation—as well as our privilege—to read and study God's life-giving message to us.

Unity and Diversity in the Bible

When you read through the Bible, you can quickly and easily see the diversity between its two covers. The Bible was penned over the course of many centuries, by and for people of diverse languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) and cultures (from ancient Semitic to Greco-Roman). According to tradition, Moses compiled the Pentateuch—the first five books of the Bible—sometime around 1300 BC, relying on a rich oral history that predated his time by many centuries. No doubt some editor(s) put the Pentateuch in its final form years after Moses' death. At the other end of the Bible, the apostle John penned Revelation just prior to AD 100.

In addition, the Bible contains many different genres of writing. Narratives, poetry, prophecy, letters, and apocalyptic writings record the exploits, aspirations, preaching, prayers, and exhortations of a wide diversity of people. In fact, it's truly remarkable that such a collection could find its way into one book!

We also see another kind of diversity in the Bible's two Testaments (meaning "covenants"). The older Testament, the Scriptures of the Jews (the Hebrew Scriptures), functions as the first part of the Christian Bible. Early Christians clearly understood the Old Testament (OT) as God's Word because it testifies to the continuity of God's working in history leading up to Jesus. Of course, what the Christians call the OT, Jews simply call the Bible. For Christians, the newer Testament relates the fulfillment of God's promises to provide the Redeemer and proclaim the message of salvation in Christ throughout the world. The name "New Testament" (NT) represents the "New Covenant" in Christ, who fulfilled the prophecies of the OT (see Jer 31:31; Ezek 37:26; see also Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6; and Heb 8:8; 9:15; 12:24).

If the Bible is so diverse, what can we claim about the unity of Scripture? Of course, we can speak of the unity of the OT as the collection of ancient Israel's Scriptures, and the NT as the early church's collection. Further, both the OT and NT affirm allegiance to the one true God: *Yahweh*. The Israelite affirmation has always been clear, as expressed in the *Shema* (the Hebrew word translated "hear"): "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one" (Deut 6:4). And while the early Christians (mostly Jews who had embraced Jesus as the Messiah) continued to affirm monotheism (for example, see 1 Cor 8:4), they quickly came to attribute the devotion due solely to *Yahweh* to Jesus as Lord too (see 1 Cor 8:6). Eventually, after several centuries of deliberation, Christians formally expressed what Scripture has always implied—that God is triune, one essence in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (reflected in texts such as Matt 28:19 and 2 Cor 13:14).

Beyond seeing the one true God as a unifying center for the Bible, we can also identify a unifying narrative: the story of redemption, sometimes called "The Grand Narrative."[1] Following the "good" creation, humans—although made in God's image—disobeyed God and fell into sin. Genesis 3–11 details some results of this fall. Then, starting in Genesis 12, the rest of the Bible charts God's efforts to redeem what was lost: the nation Israel, the coming of the Messiah, the expansion of the message though

the church. This story of God's redemption culminates in a new creation: a new heaven and a new earth (detailed in Revelation). Even portions of Scripture not directly engaged in telling this redemption story—whether the Law, Wisdom Literature, and Prophets of the OT or the Epistles of the NT—provide guidance for how God's people can live as redeemed people.

Of course, the Bible's unity doesn't imply uniformity. Books have different emphases; even the Gospels, which all tell the story of Jesus' life and death, differ from each other in their areas of focus. The OT Law prohibited God's people from eating shrimp and pork, while in the NT "Jesus declared all foods clean" (Mark 7:19). While the terms and issues might change as we move through the story, the Bible moves confidently forward under God's sovereign direction. Perhaps that represents the ultimate unity: God works all things according to the purpose of his will (see Eph 1:11) to save a people who love and worship him alone.

The Canon of the Bible

If you have friends who belong to various Christian denominations—whether Protestant, Catholic, or Eastern Orthodox—who talk about the Bible, this question might surface: Why do the Bibles of some groups include books between the OT and NT?

This section in some Christian Bibles, called the Apocrypha or deuterocanonical books, consists of thirteen or more books written by the Jews prior to the first century AD, but not formally included in the Jewish Scriptures. Do the groups who include the Apocrypha in their Bibles place the same value on these books as they do on the books of the OT and NT? In other words, what's the extent of the "Canon" of Scripture?

The English word *canon* comes from the Greek word that means "rule" or "standard." Canon refers to the measuring stick that defines what's "in" and what's "out" of Scripture. Catholics and some branches of Eastern Orthodoxy add various Jewish writings written during the time between the OT and NT (although they differ on what to include or exclude). Anglicans include readings from the Apocrypha in their lectionary but do not draw from those books to establish doctrine. Mormons include books written in the nineteenth century AD that no other traditions recognize.

As we examine the process Jews and Christians used to formulate their canons, we can better understand why disagreement still exists among these various groups about what makes up the Bible. At the same time, we should

admit that the process used to canonize books is somewhat shadowy and untidy, leaving us to draw conclusions from reports and data that don't always answer all the questions we want to raise.

However, the overall picture is clear enough. So, let's consider the issues surrounding how the various canons were formulated by looking at them in four sections: how the OT Canon was formed, how the NT Canon was formed, how Christians arrived at what to include in their Bible, and how to view the Apocrypha.

How the Old Testament Canon Came into Being

As we noted earlier, the OT contains writings that claim to have divine authority. Naturally, the Jews collected and revered the books making those claims. Eventually, Jews combined the five books of the prophet Moses into a unit, known as the Pentateuch. Deuteronomy ends with Moses' death and the implied acknowledgment that this biblical unit was complete. By the fifth century BC, the Jews recognized these books as Scripture.

The Jews also viewed the words of other prophets—such as Joshua and Samuel—as authoritative and coming from the Lord, so these writings were also retained. And this process continued, even for writings by those not identified as prophets. Some of the authors were kings or other prominent individuals. King David's words in 2 Samuel 23:2, for example, reflect this recognition: "The Spirit of the LORD spoke through me; his word was on my tongue."

Eventually, in addition to the collection of Moses' books (sometimes referred to as "the Law"), the Hebrew Bible came to include "the Prophets" (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and twelve Minor Prophets) and "the Writings" (Ruth, Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Lamentations, Daniel, Esther, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles). While this threefold grouping isn't found in Christian Bibles, it nicely reflects the literary character of the books. Together they comprise the *Tanakh* (derived from the initial Hebrew letters in these three groups).

We can't be sure when individual books in the Hebrew Bible were acknowledged as canonical or when these three groupings first appeared. In about 160 BC, Judas Maccabeus made a concerted effort to collect the holy books that had been scattered during the war of independence because at that point the Jews believed that with Malachi the writings of the prophets had ceased.[2]

By the end of the second century BC, the Greek translation of the prologue to the apocryphal book Ecclesiasticus mentioned these three sections of the Hebrew Canon (Law, Prophets, Writings). Jesus (see Luke 24:44) and the first-century AD Jewish philosopher Philo[3] acknowledged these three divisions (although they gave "the Writings" the name "Psalms").

Reading later texts of the Talmud (records of rabbinic interpretations of the OT pertaining to Jewish law, ethics, customs, and history), some scholars argue that around the year AD 90, rabbis debated the status of the Canon. Apparently, some prominent manuscripts included apocryphal books along with the canonical ones. But if this meeting of the rabbis actually occurred, it merely removed the apocryphal books to arrive at the twenty-two books of the authoritative Jewish Canon. Christians reorganized these books as the thirty-nine books commonly known as the Old Testament.

How the New Testament Canon Came into Being

Early Christians didn't consciously set out to write Scripture. But the message about Jesus soon led his followers in the first century to draft writings—letters first and then other documents—that were eventually recognized as having divine authority. For example, early Christians viewed some of Paul's letters on par with the OT: "There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, *as they do the other scriptures*" (2 Pet 3:16, NRSV, emphasis added).

As the apostles spread the good news of salvation, they realized the importance of retaining the traditions about Jesus (see Acts 10:36-40). They urged Christians to conform to conduct based on Jesus' words (for example, see 1 Cor 7:10; Acts 20:35). The early church based the Communion or Eucharist ceremony on remembered words of Jesus (see 1 Cor 11:23-25). And Paul noted that the essential message of personal salvation through Christ's death and resurrection was something he "received" and passed on (see 1 Cor 15:3-5; Gal 1:9, 11-12).

The emerging church concluded that in Jesus Christ, God was fulfilling the promise of a new covenant (see Jer 31:31-34), which Jesus' death and resurrection confirmed (see Luke 22:20; 2 Cor 3:6; Heb 8:8-13). Just as the law of Moses applied to the generations of Israel, the apostles naturally applied Jesus' words to his followers. These applications—coming in the forms of the Epistles, Acts, the Gospels, and Revelation—assumed

positions of authority as well. God was speaking through Christian apostles and prophets. And while all these writings don't make explicit claims to be Scripture or even authoritative, their usefulness and divine status became evident almost immediately. If books written hundreds of years after Moses could enter the Canon of the OT, the Christian Bible could also include books written decades following Jesus.

Some of the books in our NT (e.g., Revelation, Jude, 2 Peter, and James) were disputed over several centuries before finally being embraced. In addition, some early lists included books not in our NT, such as Barnabas, Hermas, and Clement. (These are called NT Apocrypha; they are distinct from the OT Apocrypha included in Catholic and Orthodox Bibles.) But most early Christians never acknowledged the authoritative status of these books, so their favor was generally short-lived, and they were excluded from the final Canon.

How Did Christians Arrive at Their Bible?

In the earliest period following the apostles, the Christian Canon of the OT corresponded to the Jewish Canon. The NT itself refers to the three sections of the Jewish Scriptures and cites most of the individual OT books authoritatively. None of the Jewish apocryphal books are cited in the NT.

By about AD 200, church leaders realized that a NT Canon was required to counter the rise of heresy and false teachings. Over the first several centuries of the church's history, Christians developed standards for what to include in Scripture. Some Christians found value in certain OT apocryphal books, which found their way into some Christian copies of the Septuagint (or LXX, the Greek translation of the OT). Some scholars refer to this as the "wide canon." However, several prominent early Christian leaders (for example, Bishop Melito in the second century, Origen in the second to third centuries, Epiphanius in the fourth century, and Jerome in the fourth to fifth centuries) defended a "narrow canon" that put the apocryphal books in a separate category.

As early as the second century AD, Polycarp (said to be a disciple of the apostle John) referenced Matthew and Luke. The Christian books called *2 Clement* and the *Epistle of Barnabas* (dated about AD 130) also cited Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Meanwhile, the heretic Marcion proposed his own NT Canon, with one gospel account (we don't know which) and ten Pauline Epistles (omitting 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus).

Irenaeus, an apologist and disciple of Polycarp, confronted Marcion and other heretics in his *Against the Heresies*, which would play a key early role in determining what books would be canonical.

By the third century, church leaders Tertullian (c. 155–230), Clement of Alexandria (died between 211 and 216), and Origen (c. 185–254) all made ample use of most NT writings in the Canon we now possess (although they also cited some of the early church fathers' works as holding similar authority). The question of the Canon largely stabilized by the early AD 300s, with certain books (as early church historian and bishop Eusebius wrote in *Ecclesiastical History* 3.25) "acknowledged," meaning they definitely belonged in the NT Canon. He termed other books (including James, Jude, 2 Peter, and 2 and 3 John) "disputed," meaning their status was uncertain; some books (including Revelation) "spurious," meaning they were thought to be false; and yet other books heretical and rejected outright.

The Canon was solidified in the late fourth century. Most likely, the Thirty-Ninth Paschal Letter of Athanasius (AD 367) settled the Canon for the Eastern church, while the Councils of Hippo (AD 393) and Carthage (AD 397) ratified the same list for the Western church. As a result, the NT came to consist of the twenty-seven books in our Bibles today.

Being a part of the Canon, however, was not what conferred authority on the books; rather, books that were *acknowledged as divinely inspired* were put into the Canon. We must get this correct. So how did the early leaders of the church recognize inspiration? While somewhat simplistic, three terms summarize the process they used: apostolicity, catholicity, and orthodoxy.

- *Apostolicity*. This term refers to writings that originated with, or at least were closely connected to, one of Jesus' apostles. Proximity to Jesus, the founder of the New Covenant, was one requirement for adding a book to the Canon. Although some books were not written by apostles, the authors had close connection to an apostle (for example, Luke as a close associate of Paul).

- *Catholicity*. This term, referring to widespread use over the entire realm of Christendom, carried significant weight in determining that a book was authoritative. When churches from east to west and north

to south recognized a book's authority and found it useful, its case for inclusion in the Canon was strong.

- *Orthodoxy*. To be worthy of the Canon, a book needed to affirm the church's emerging understanding of truth and theological soundness. Most likely, the texts of the Gnostics and other heretics were rejected on this score.

So, by AD 400 the church had finalized its Canon. The Bible of the Jews, taken over intact as the Jews had preserved it, became the OT. The NT emerged after a long process of sifting that resulted in its twenty-seven books. While some Christians added the apocryphal books to their OT Canon, others considered them secondary, and still others rejected them altogether.

What About the Old Testament Apocrypha?

The thirteen OT apocryphal books are preserved only in the Christian Greek versions of the Bible (given the names Vaticanus, Sinaiticus, and Alexandrinus). Eleven were originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic, the other two in Greek. Though written by the Jews, they were not preserved by the Jews, and Jews today don't consider them part of the Bible. They adopted as authoritative only books from their commentaries on the Scriptures and oral laws: the Mishnah (c. AD 200) and the two Talmuds (c. 300s and 500). The "wide canon" thus includes the thirty-nine books of the OT, the OT Apocrypha, some so-called Pseudepigrapha (books falsely attributed to more famous writers), and other Christian compositions.

In the late fourth century, when Jerome translated the Hebrew and Aramaic OT into Latin, he included only its thirty-nine books and considered the others apocryphal. Later, however, the Western church expanded the Bible to include the thirteen apocryphal books, labeling them "deuterocanonical," or secondary to the universally accepted books of the Canon. In the sixteenth century, when reformer Martin Luther rejected the biblical status of the apocryphal books, the Roman Catholic Church responded by endorsing their inspiration and reaffirming their place in the Bible as deuterocanonical.

Why did Protestants ultimately reject the Apocrypha as part of Scripture? We can observe at least four reasons.

The first goes to the heart of the Reformation: *sola Scriptura*, which means "Scripture alone." The Reformers were reacting against perceived abuses by the Roman Catholic Church, associated with the use of tradition and extracanonical sources (such as the Apocrypha) to support its doctrine. A classic example comes from the apocryphal book 2 Maccabees 12:44-45, which encourages praying for the dead. Using this text as support, the Roman church developed the concept of purgatory and the practice of praying for (and paying for) the speedy transition from purgatory to heaven. Protestants note that the NT never affirms prayer for the dead and does not acknowledge the existence of purgatory.

Second, Protestants assert that Jesus and the writers of the NT used only the thirty-nine books of the OT. They never directly quoted the books of the OT Apocrypha.

Third, Protestants point out that the Jews themselves limited the Bible to the thirty-nine books of the OT. First-century Jews such as Josephus and Philo, and later rabbis up to the writing of the Talmuds, claimed that prophecy ceased with Malachi.

Fourth, the acceptance of the Apocrypha as Scripture didn't start until at least a full century following the age of the apostles, perhaps after the church lost sight of its debt to the Jews. This underscores an important point: While Protestants reject the Apocrypha as Scripture, they don't view the books as useless or heretical. In fact, the thirteen books of the OT Apocrypha supply many valuable historical and theological insights into the Jewish world during the time between the OT and NT.

In summary, the Protestant church generally acknowledges that we can find useful and inspiring information in the OT Apocrypha, which can help us more fully understand the world and thinking of the Jews during the period between the OT and NT. Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches agree with that, but they also affirm the Apocrypha's rightful place in the Bible, even if labeled deuterocanonical.

Writing in the Ancient World

Archaeologists have found clay bullae (seals for papyrus documents) in Israel dated c. 600 BC that reflect a distinctive Hebrew language and script. Other ancient Hebrew writing has been discovered on seals, ostraca (broken pieces of clay pots used as writing surfaces), vases, weights, stones, and amulets. This Hebrew writing is related to but distinct from other Northwest Semitic languages such as Aramaic, the language of the nomadic

Aramaeans of northern Mesopotamia and Syria. The Canaanites and Phoenicians used the same alphabet, and by the eighth century BC, the Assyrians also adopted Aramaic as their official language. Before long, it became the international language for diplomacy and commerce, extending from Asia Minor (modern Turkey) to Afghanistan, Egypt, and Northern Arabia.

When the Persians ruled Palestine, they made Aramaic the official language and script of the land; archaeologists have found evidence of Aramaic on seals and ostraca from that period (c. 539–332 BC). Eventually, even biblical texts were written in Aramaic—by Ezra's time (c. 400 BC) and later, Aramaic became the common script for copying the Torah, and original portions of the biblical books of Ezra and Daniel were recorded in Aramaic (see Ezra 4:6–6:18; 7:16-26; Dan 2:4–7:28). By the Hellenistic period (c. 300 BC and later), Aramaic had virtually replaced Hebrew for writing, except for inscriptions on coins, some biblical texts, and the writing of God's name.

Based on archaeological discoveries of writings on ossuaries (stone boxes, buildings, or other places used for burials), ostraca, letters, and contracts, we know that Aramaic also became the everyday *spoken* language by the Jews into the first century AD. But as Alexander the Great successfully spread Greek language and culture beyond the boundaries of the Greek peninsula, both spoken Greek and the Greek script eventually became common in Palestine. Archaeologists have discovered Greek texts of biblical manuscripts in Qumran and Masada. Latin is found in limited use in Palestine as early as 63 BC, as members of the Roman army and imperial officials from Italy moved into the region.

Beyond the borders of Palestine to the west, Jews spoke and wrote Greek more and more. By the second century BC, Jews translated their Bible into Greek (the LXX), the dominant language in Egypt.

Greek became the common language of the ancient world from about the second century BC until the third or fourth century AD, and the authors of the books that eventually made up the NT all wrote in Greek. Although Jesus spoke Aramaic for much of his teaching, and while oral stories about his words and activities might have circulated among Aramaic speakers at first, soon those traditions entered the Greek language. This means that if the NT Gospels were written as early as three decades following Jesus' resurrection, the accounts of Jesus' life and death were already fixed in Greek.

Bible Manuscripts—Understanding Textual Criticism

The Bible includes literary works that have survived for two to three thousand years, yet we don't possess original copies of any portions of the Bible. That leads us to ask how the words of the Bible were preserved.

Using preexisting traditions and materials, writers composed or edited the books of the OT over a span of six hundred or more years. Most likely, their work began during the reign of King David or King Solomon. The authors of the NT books wrote during a much shorter span—probably about fifty years—but across a much larger geographical territory in the Roman world. Eventually, Israel and the church revered these books. But how were they preserved? Moreover, since we don't possess any original documents, how do we know that our copies of these books correspond to the original works? Can we be confident that our Bibles accurately reflect what the original authors or editors composed?

To answer these questions, scholars turn to the discipline known as *textual criticism*, which is the process of identifying and removing alterations or errors from extant texts and manuscripts to come as close as possible to the "originals." Let's look briefly at two aspects of textual criticism: the "autographs" of the writers and the ancient process of making copies of manuscripts.

The Autographs

Imagine King David writing out Psalm 34, or the apostle Paul composing his letter to the Romans. We don't know if David wrote out his psalms himself or dictated them to a scribe. With Paul, we know that a scribe named Tertius penned the epistle of Romans (see Rom 16:22). In either case, as part of textual criticism, we call the original copy that came from an author (no matter who put pen to manuscript) the "autograph."

When Scripture's writers composed or edited their books, the pages looked different from the one you're reading. Of course, these pieces were handwritten in Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek. The writers didn't usually leave spaces between words, perhaps because writing materials were costly, and the languages employed only capital letters. What's more, in Hebrew and Aramaic, scribes wrote only consonants, not vowels. Imagine the first verse of Psalm 34,

I will extol the Lord at all times;
his praise will always be on my lips

written in all capital letters, with all vowels and spaces between words removed:

WLLXTLTHLRDTLLTMS;
HSPRSWLLLWYSBNMLPS.

You'd probably wonder how anyone could read this. Words did have vowel sounds, but the written forms of Hebrew and Aramaic didn't record them. Native speakers learned the words with the vowel sounds and supplied them when reading. Still, this practice created a real problem for later scribes who copied these books. So, the Masoretes (Jewish scribes who worked in Palestine and Babylonia from about AD 600–1000) developed a system of dots and other markers to identify vowels and accents to assist readers in pronouncing the texts correctly. Here's how that first line of Psalm 34 looks: אֲבָרְכָה אֶת־יְהוָה בְּכָל־עֵת.

Greek words do include vowels, so NT readers didn't face that problem. However, Greek writing at the time didn't include spaces between words, meaning that Paul's initial verse in Romans looked something like this:

PAULASERVANTOFJESUSCHRISTCALLEDTOBEAN
APOSTLEANDSETAPARTFORTHEGOSPELOFGOD

With a bit of practice, you can make out the words. But you might run into problems with some sentences. Consider this one:

GODISNOWHERE

Depending on where you divide this into words, you could end up with very different meanings: God is nowhere, or God is now here. This is rarely a problem in deciphering Greek in the NT.

These issues demonstrate the need for textual criticism, including consideration of how copies of the autographs resulted in many variations of manuscripts.

Manuscript Transmission

When you have a keepsake or a memento—perhaps a watch that belonged to your grandfather or a favorite aunt's silver bracelet—you regard that item

as significant and valuable. What's more, you treasure and protect it, and eventually pass it on to someone who will also treasure it.

What about the autographs of the books of the Bible? First, considering the perceived value of these books, many people would want to read them. Some might even want copies for themselves or their assemblies. In ancient Israel, individual synagogues wanted their own copies of the Torah. And in the NT era, churches scattered around the Mediterranean Sea wanted to apply the instructions Paul recorded in his epistles to their own congregations, so trained and untrained scribes produced copies of these books for wider circulation. Eventually, copies were made from copies, and so on through the centuries.

Today, a copy machine or scanner produces a perfect copy of an original document; however, human scribes copying biblical books didn't. Inevitably, the laborious process of copying a biblical document introduced errors. Some mistakes were inadvertent and unintentional. A scribe's eyes might slip to a different line of the text, causing him to omit a line of words. Or a scribe might misunderstand a letter and substitute another. Other alterations were intentional when scribes copied manuscripts. Sometimes they desired to "correct" the text they were copying to "improve" its style or theology, or to harmonize conflicts.

As copies proliferated during the centuries prior to printing presses, scribes continued to commit errors. As copies were made of copies, scribes often perpetuated prior errors and introduced new ones. Perhaps when they were able to compare various copies, scribes corrected some errors. Still, not all corrections necessarily reverted to the way the autographs read. As the number of copies reached hundreds and then thousands, the resulting state of biblical texts became quite complex.

Let's look at an example of the confusion that these various copies of biblical manuscripts create. In Matthew 5:22, Jesus says, "But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment" (NRSV). However, the KJV reads, "But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment." Note that the KJV inserts the phrase "without a cause." This difference reflects the fact that some copies of manuscripts in the original languages of Scripture include these words (the copies available to the KJV translators) and others don't (most early manuscripts). For a variety of reasons, most scholars agree that a well-meaning scribe added the words "without a cause" to the manuscript he was copying and that the words were not original to

Matthew. We can easily understand how a scribe might find Jesus' words difficult and, as a result, try to clarify what he thought Jesus meant. In this case, a scribe might have thought, *Jesus wouldn't prohibit all anger, only anger "without a cause."* Apart from the KJV and the NKJV, all modern versions omit this phrase.

In addition to copying the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts, Jews and Christians began to translate the biblical books into other languages. First, in the second century BC, the Jews translated their Hebrew/Aramaic Scriptures into Greek (the LXX). After the early church embraced the OT into its Canon, the entire Bible—in parts or as a whole—was translated into other languages as the church spread. In the fourth through tenth centuries AD, Christians could read Scripture in Coptic, Old Latin, then the Latin Vulgate, Syriac, Armenian, Georgian, and Ethiopic. Lectionaries began to include portions of Scripture in local languages for church liturgies and other uses. As we compare these manuscripts and versions, we discover "variants" or differences among them—places where the manuscript copies contain different readings.

Footnotes in most modern versions of the Bible alert readers only to places where variant readings make a difference worth mentioning. They ignore hundreds and hundreds of minor variants that minimally affect the meaning of the text. Modern critical editions of the OT and NT that scholars and Bible translators use include most, if not all, of the variants.

Textual criticism is the process of sifting through the variants with the goal of determining what the original autographs most likely said and to "recover" as much of the original text of a biblical book as possible. The process aims to reverse the years of alteration, copying, and translation. Let's look at how textual criticism works. Because what we can recover and how we go about the task are different for the OT and NT, let's examine each separately.

Textual Criticism of the Old Testament

Because of the length of time that it took to "produce" the OT and the scarceness of manuscript evidence over the course of that period—as well as the length of time from the OT's origin to the present—most OT scholars shy away from the goal of recovering the original wording of an OT book. That goal is simply unattainable.

In about AD 915, the Masoretes produced the main Hebrew text available today (called the Masoretic Text or MT). About a thousand years earlier,

Jews had translated the OT from Hebrew into Greek (the Septuagint or LXX), which has been preserved in Christian manuscripts. Beyond that, we possess a few papyri, various texts from the caves at Qumran near the Dead Sea that reflect many books of the OT, Aramaic paraphrases of select biblical texts (called Targums), and references to the Bible in rabbinic sources.

Most biblical scholars believe that from the time of Moses, many OT books went through both oral and written versions, edited along the way, sometimes many centuries after their original appearances. The Jewish community acknowledged the books in the OT as authoritative, and most scholars agree that in about the first century BC, the textual traditions in the OT books became relatively fixed. The amazing correspondence between the scroll of the book of Isaiah found at Qumran (c. 100 BC) and the edition of Isaiah in the Hebrew MT about a thousand years later supports this conclusion.

Because Jews did not specify what versions of the biblical books were authoritative during the many centuries leading up to the first century AD, OT scholars mine the LXX, the Targums, the Qumran texts, and the MT in an effort to discover an authoritative text. OT textual criticism seeks to discover the earliest renditions of the biblical texts—texts that most likely gave rise to the others—even if the goal of the autographs remains out of reach.

Because the process of sifting through manuscripts and variants is the same for both the OT and NT, we'll look at that in the next section.

Textual Criticism of the New Testament

In some ways, the task of textual criticism for the NT is easier than for the OT. The authors composed the autographs over a considerably shorter period (c. 50 years). And relatively quickly, Christians began to copy these texts and distribute them to churches around the Roman Empire. As a result, many copies survived. With a few exceptions, the production of the texts themselves didn't go through a long period of development. For those that did undergo a series of edits (perhaps the Gospel of John), they emerged in "final form" in a matter of decades, not centuries. Likely, all the NT books had been composed by AD 100 and were already being copied and circulated.

The number of both copies and variants makes the task of textual criticism complicated. The autographs were copied, perhaps numerous times. Then copies were made of copies, and so on. Eventually, as the church

moved into areas beyond its Greek-speaking origins, Christians translated sections or the entire NT into other languages.

Arriving at the Original Texts

If we want to play the part of textual critics, we need to consider two main factors in our attempt to recover the original (or earliest) forms of a text: external evidence and internal evidence. External evidence concerns the manuscript of the book itself—the number, dates, and types of manuscripts that we can access and read. Internal evidence consists of two forms: (1) what we know about how scribes operated and what they were likely to do when making copies of texts; and (2) what we can know about the original authors of the texts—their thought, theology, language, writing style, and background.

The field of textual criticism is very complex and nuanced. In what follows, I'll try to explain the process in a simple way. Arriving at the best possible reading among various copies and versions of manuscripts of biblical books involves decisions based on probabilities. On balance, textual critics decide that one reading (variant) is more likely to be the original (or preferable) reading than others. The process involves putting manuscripts with variant readings side by side.

As we look at the manuscripts themselves (the *external evidence*), a variant is more likely to be original if it is earlier than the others, occurs in better-quality manuscripts, and is found in manuscripts located over the widest geographical area. While there are exceptions to these guidelines, most often the longer the time between the original text and a copy, the more likely an error was introduced. Also, if a scribe located in Caesarea made an error when copying a text, that error wouldn't be present in copies in other locations. As scholars assess the variants of manuscripts, they often come to trust some manuscripts more than others because those seem to contain the more likely readings more often than not.

As centuries passed, the number of manuscripts grew exponentially. An error introduced in the fifth century AD might subsequently have hundreds of copies spring from it. Manuscripts that contained a better reading (that is, close to the original that the biblical author wrote) might never be copied again. So that reading, though original, would occur in fewer manuscripts.

Regarding *internal evidence*, textual critics look at how scribes worked. Often the shortest reading is more likely to be original because a scribe

probably expanded, improved, or enhanced a reading rather than abbreviate it. That also implies that a more difficult reading is probably original. Remember the example above (Matt 5:22): The absence of "without a cause" is more difficult than its presence (it's also shorter), so that reading is probably the original. In the case of parallel passages, such as in the synoptic Gospels, a reading that diverges from parallels is more likely original because a scribe would probably try to change a passage to conform to another Gospel rather than introduce or leave a conflict.

Second, textual critics compare a text's vocabulary, style, and theology to what is typical of the author (assuming we have sufficient data to make that determination). Given the background of the biblical authors, a variant that seems more Semitic has a better claim to originality than one that's more Hellenistic or Greek. A reading that diverges from its OT background, from church theology, or from liturgical expressions in the church is more likely to be the original. Again, scribes would likely alter texts in the direction of conformity to orthodoxy and church practice rather than against them.

The entire process of textual criticism boils down to this: The correct reading is the one that best explains how the others came into existence. To go back to the earlier example from Matthew 5:22, it's more likely that the *absence* of the phrase "without a cause" explains why a scribe would add it. It's less likely that the phrase existed in the original and that a scribe deleted it.

Certainly, the way critics use these criteria isn't exact. Sometimes the criteria work in tension with each other. Textual criticism is both an art and a science, and critics must often *weigh* more than *count* the evidence as they work. They constantly make judgment calls, and decisions result after they consider different probabilities. This approach, sometimes called "reasoned eclecticism," lies behind the current Hebrew and Greek Testaments and serves as the basis for all modern translations of the Bible.

The principles outlined here have been developed by OT and NT scholars largely since the end of the nineteenth century. As more evidence surfaces—often in the form of earlier or better manuscripts—scholars evaluate and revise the published original-language versions of both Testaments. The result is an overwhelming consensus among scholars of all backgrounds around the world that our versions of the Hebrew/Aramaic and Greek Testaments are as close to the originals as the current state of the evidence allows. For the OT, that text is *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, 5th edition (2006). For the NT, the texts are Nestle-Aland,

Novum Testamentum Graece, 28th edition (German Bible Society, 2012) and *The Greek New Testament*, 5th edition (United Bible Societies, 2014). The texts of these two Greek NT versions are identical.

Translating the Bible

Now that we understand how we've arrived at texts that are as close as possible to what the original authors wrote, and thus what God inspired, we still face the work of translating those texts faithfully into the languages of the people of God. Of course, even if we have the original words that biblical authors penned, most people can't read them. We need the expertise of biblical scholars who can read the ancient Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek languages to translate the Bible into languages we understand.

One glance at the Bible section in a bookstore or the results when one enters "Bible" into a search engine shows not only how many versions are available in English (and other languages), but also how many different types of Bibles exist. We find Bibles that contain only the translated words of Scripture, various kinds of study Bibles, and Bibles targeted to specific audiences.

Why are so many different Bibles available? How do you know which one is *best* or whether some are *more reliable* or *more faithful* than others? Why do some people insist on retaining the King James (or Authorized) Version of 1611 (or its updated NKJV), while others argue that modern versions provide a better option? Let's look at the following three issues about translating the Bible that will help answer these questions: the nature of translation, the available English translations of the Bible, and the process of selecting a version for yourself.

The Nature of Translation

Many of us studied a foreign language at some point, perhaps in high school, or we know someone who speaks a language other than English. Even minimal contact with another language is enough to convince us that different languages use different ways to convey the same idea.

When translating the Bible into English, translators need to know both what the original language means and how English (or any target language) best conveys that meaning. In the transfer from the original language to another, translators use different tactics depending on the goal of their translation. How closely should they keep to the words or structures of the source language? What role does the target language have?

Let's look at a few of the issues translators need to address that make their task complex.

MEANING OR EXACTNESS?

In producing a translation, does the translator place priority on reproducing the *effect* of the meaning of the word, phrase, or sentence of the original, or on finding terms to reproduce exactly in English what the Hebrew or Greek words mean? Putting it simply, what's the goal of the translation: transferring the intended meaning of the original, or trying to duplicate the original's exact wording—or some combination of the two?

PRIORITY ON TEXT OR AUDIENCE?

Translators must also decide whether to place a higher priority on the needs of the readers or on reproducing the forms of the original language. To use an extreme example, if you had to translate "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow" (Isa 1:18) to an Indonesian tribal group in a tropical climate with no concept of snow, would you substitute a different word for *snow* (a cloud) in order to meet the needs of that audience? Or would you use the word *snow* (or invent a word for *snow*) because it most closely matches the original language?

BALANCING POTENTIAL AMBIGUITIES

Moving from one language to another requires decisions on how to handle ambiguities in one or both of them. A literal translation might introduce more ambiguity into the target language than what existed in the original language.

For example, 1 Corinthians 7:1 might read literally, as in the KJV, "It is good for a man not to touch a woman." A similar translation was adopted by the NRSV: "It is well for a man not to touch a woman." Is that more or less ambiguous in meaning than, "It is good to abstain from sexual relations" (NLT)? The NIV1978 reading, "It is good for a man not to marry," takes the modern reader in a different direction. The NIV2011 altered it to, "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman" (much closer, I'd argue, to the intention of Paul's words). *Touch* in the KJV and NRSV is a literal translation of the Greek word *haptō*. But translating it literally might result in readers missing the sexual connotations of the word in this context. In this instance, the NLT and the NIV2011 correctly remove the ambiguity.[4] So, you can see that the word "literal" is slippery at best.

In other words, *literal* often isn't a useful term when speaking of translations. A better phrase to capture what most people mean by literal is *formally equivalent*. For example, in 1 Corinthians 7:1, *touch* is more formally equivalent to the Greek word *haptō*, but it's not necessarily more literal if the issue is *meaning* for modern readers. Did Paul intend to prohibit men from shaking hands with women?

Another troublesome ambiguity concerns gender. In Greek, the words for man (*anēr*) and woman (*gynē*) can also mean husband and wife. Another word, *anthrōpos*, means person or human, but in the Greek NT it can also refer specifically to a man (male person). In the past, the words *man* or *men* often functioned generically in English. When they read "All men are sinners," people understood it to mean "All people are sinners." Translators didn't face any trouble when they translated the Greek *anthrōpos* as "man" or its plural as "men."

However, an ambiguity for modern translations occurs when *anthrōpos* refers to people generically. For example, in Matthew 18:7 Jesus says, "Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks! For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come; but woe to that *man* through whom the stumbling block comes!" (NASB1995, emphasis added). The word translated "man" here is *anthrōpos*. See what the ESV does with this: "Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the *one* by whom the temptation comes!" (emphasis added). By translating *anthrōpos* as "one," the ESV avoids the ambiguity for modern readers who might wonder whether Jesus announces judgment only on males who cause others to stumble. Many versions translate *anthrōpos* here as "person" to avoid the gender ambiguity (see NIV, NET, NLT). The current version of the NASB2020 replaces "man" with "person."

Another tactic for avoiding gender ambiguity is to take statements that are singular in the original text and make them plural in the translation. For example, the ESV renders Psalm 1:1 as follows: "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers." Does the psalmist believe that only an individual male can be blessed in this way? Answering this question with a no, the NRSV reads, "Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers." In this case, the NRSV gains a more inclusive appeal to all readers, male and female, to seek God's blessing, and women don't need to feel that the text doesn't speak to them. Yet the NRSV loses the original formally equivalent

use of singular nouns and verbs. Another loss might be a sense of individual responsibility to choose carefully the counsel we follow. To avoid that, the NIV resorts to "one" to avoid the gender ambiguity: "Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers." (By the way, note in my previous sentence that I used the plural pronoun *we* to appeal to all readers of this book.)

FORMALLY OR DYNAMICALLY EQUIVALENT?

Earlier, I mentioned the phrase "formally equivalent." All translations fit on a continuum from *formal equivalence* to *dynamic equivalence* to free *paraphrase*. Although these labels are far from precise, let's look at each one.

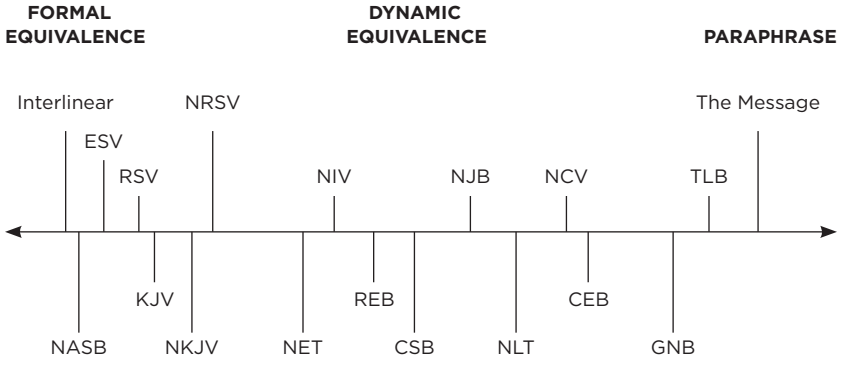
The purest formal equivalence is *interlinear*—simply substituting the word in the target language for each word in the source. The first clause of John 3:16 would read: "So much for loved the God the world." However, that isn't really a true translation. *Formally* equivalent translations adjust structure and wording enough to produce an acceptable version in the target language. Of our modern English translations, the NASB and ESV represent this approach.

In contrast to this word-for-word approach, a *dynamically equivalent* translation tends to be thought for thought. The translators ask how the original text *functioned* for readers and employ the best expressions in the target language that will achieve that same function. When concepts or images of the original don't function in the same ways today, contemporary versions often substitute modern forms to achieve dynamic equivalence. For example, the Hebrew text of 1 Samuel 25:22 speaks of urinating against the wall ("any that pisseth against the wall" KJV; the LXX reads "make water against the wall"). But this graphic image isn't required to make the point that David intends to kill every male in Nabal's household ("leave alive one male of all who belong to him!" NIV). Examples of other versions seeking dynamic equivalence include the NLT, NET, and GNT.

Finally, a *paraphrase* tends to take more liberties in departing from the wording and structure of the original-language texts, using more distinctive language targeted to a specific culture. *The Message* is considered by many to be a paraphrase due to its free and creative use of modern American idioms in translating ancient languages. *The Message* renders 1 Samuel 25:22 as "May God do his worst to me if Nabal and every cur in his misbegotten brood aren't dead meat by morning!"

Figure 1.1 reflects where the most popular modern versions fall along this continuum.

FIGURE 1.1



All these versions have potential merits and pitfalls. While *formally equivalent* translations appear to begin with a worthy and useful goal, these versions might run the risk of using language that misleads modern readers; in only one sense do they maintain proximity to the inspired version. *Dynamically equivalent* versions might offer a better chance of causing modern readers to get the message, but these versions and paraphrases might omit or alter the structure and wording—and possibly the intention—of the original text. For most readers, that is a fair trade-off.[5]

Available English Versions

The continuum chart in the last section lists just some of the versions available in English today. How did we end up with so many translations of the Bible into English? Other languages have their own stories to tell.

Though versions produced by John Wycliffe, Miles Coverdale, and William Tyndale—as well as the Geneva Bible (1575)—appeared earlier in English, King James I of England commissioned the translation that became the Authorized Version throughout the British Isles and then eventually the entire English-speaking world. His team of scholars compared the available Hebrew and Greek manuscripts and in 1611 produced the version that dominated English language usage for several centuries. Working under difficult political and religious conditions, they produced an amazing translation. However, because Elizabethan English

language became archaic and obscure, the KJV was revised many times over the centuries to keep current with language usage. The most thorough updating became the NKJV. Note the differences in the various renditions of John 3:8:

> The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit. (KJV)

> The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit. (NKJV)

With the discovery of better and earlier manuscripts, biblical scholars eventually saw the need to produce a new English translation based on the best available manuscripts and the best principles of textual criticism. In 1885, British biblical scholars produced the Revised Version (RV), and in 1901 the American Standard Version (ASV) appeared in the United States.

As archaeologists discovered additional ancient texts in the twentieth century, including the Dead Sea Scrolls, American scholars produced the Revised Standard Version (RSV) in 1952. While some groups of Christians shunned the RSV and insisted on using only the KJV, the RSV marked a monumental achievement based on thoroughly modern principles of textual criticism, translation theory, and the best manuscripts. In 1971, scholars updated the RSV and in 1990 thoroughly reworked it to produce the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). As we observed earlier, this translation adopted gender-inclusive language. The RSV and NRSV have become the mainstays of many Christian groups.

Although some Christians shunned the RSV, many of them saw the wisdom of incorporating the latest advances in textual criticism and moving beyond the KJV. Therefore, in the US, conservative biblical scholars produced a formally equivalent translation, the New American Standard Bible (NASB, 1971), updating the ASV. British biblical scholars produced the more dynamically equivalent New English Bible (NEB, completed in 1970), subsequently updated as the Revised English Bible (REB) in 1990. Meanwhile, an international team of scholars produced a version that fell somewhere between formal and dynamic equivalence, resulting in the New International Version (NIV, completed in 1978). Further updates to the

NIV resulted in the New International Readers Version (NIRV) for young readers, the NIV Inclusive Language Edition (in Britain in 1996), Today's New International Version (TNIV, 2005), and finally the NIV as it exists today (2011).

Appearing more recently, the English Standard Version (ESV, 2016) terms itself "essentially literal," stating its goal of formal equivalence. The Christian Standard Bible (CSB, 2017) fits into this camp as well. These Bibles typically do not employ gender-inclusive language.

In addition, a desire emerged for more accessible versions that could be more easily understood by people with little biblical background. These translations often used more paraphrasing in their language. In the dynamic part of the continuum, the Bible societies issued Today's English Version (TEV, 1966), expanded later into the Good News Bible (GNB, 1976). More to the paraphrased side of the continuum, J. B. Phillips paved the way in Britain with The New Testament in Modern English for Schools (PH, 1959). Starting with *Living Letters*, American Kenneth Taylor eventually completed the entire Bible, *The Living Bible, Paraphrased* (TLB, 1971). While their goal was to paraphrase the biblical text to be understandable to modern readers, both Phillips and Taylor came under some criticism for the liberties they took in their translations. *The Living Bible* was eventually redone as a dynamic equivalent translation under a team of scholars, resulting in the New Living Translation (NLT, 1996, updated 2015). Also on the paraphrased side of the spectrum is Eugene Peterson's *The Message* (MSG, 2002, updated in 2018), which has proven very popular but has also received criticism for departure from formal words and structures of the original languages. But that was Peterson's objective![6]

A similar paraphrasing process took place in translations to other major languages and, to a decreasing extent, in languages fewer people speak or where there are fewer Christians. Luther produced the Luther Bible in German, which has undergone revisions. The same holds true for other European languages, as the production of more dynamic versions paralleled the practice in English. Through the work of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (Wycliffe Bible Translators) and the combined efforts of the United Bible Societies, all or portions of the Bible have been translated into more than two thousand languages. In many cases, some languages that previously had just formally equivalent versions now also have dynamically equivalent translations.

In fairness to translators and versions, we should evaluate Bibles by

considering what the various translations seek to accomplish. In other words, it's not fair to criticize a translation for not doing something it was never intended to do. Criticizing a dynamically equivalent translation for not translating a word "literally" means we're misunderstanding the goal of that version.

Returning to an earlier example, an interlinear word-for-word rendition of John 3:16 from Greek into English would read like this:

> So much for loved God the world, that his son the unique he gave, in order that everyone who believes in him not may perish but have life eternal.

While this retains the structure and formal translation of the original words, the result isn't acceptable English, and it doesn't convey clearly what the original Greek intended. Every version, then, must decide how much it will depart from this extremely formal equivalence to communicate the text's meaning to its readers. Most translators and Bible publishers decide who the intended readers will be and then determine whether the translation will stay closer to the original wording of the source language or to its original function.

Selecting a Version for Yourself

When choosing a Bible version for yourself, you'll need to consider several factors. One is where a translation of the Bible falls on the formally equivalent/dynamically equivalent/paraphrase spectrum. Again, the target audience often determines where a version lands on this continuum. For example, one older version targeted readers with no more than a third-grade level of reading (New Century Version). So, if you were a young person or were buying a Bible for a young person, that was one to consider. But it didn't aim for formal equivalence. The vocabulary needed to be limited and the lengths of the sentences short. What this version gained in accessibility it sacrificed in precision. Note how English versions attempt to capture the key term *anaideia* in Luke 11:8: "shameless audacity," "persistence," "impudence," "sheer persistence," "importunity," "shameless persistence," and "brashness." Can you see the translators' struggle? It's not only a matter of the level of the reader, but the precise meaning of the rare word.

Another issue that looms in the minds of some readers is the decision about gender language. Some recent versions made conscious choices to

employ gender-inclusive language. Others made equally conscious choices to retain the exclusive-language approach. The greatest benefit of gender-inclusive versions is precisely that: They seek to be inclusive. They avoid the appearance of excluding females where the original languages didn't intend to. It would be unfortunate for readers to conclude that when James wrote in Greek, "Count it all joy, my brothers" (ESV; "brethren," KJV), he was writing only to the men in his congregations. So, some versions clarify as, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters" (NIV, NRSV, NET). For those who don't know the biblical languages or who don't possess and know how to use an interlinear translation, a gender-inclusive version helps them distinguish between when the original languages referred generically to "man" and when the original referred specifically to males.

So how should you choose a Bible? One important question to ask yourself is, *How will I* use *this Bible?* Believers use their Bibles in a variety of ways, and one version might be the best choice for a specific task. For example, for a close study of a text in preparation for teaching, you might want to use a version from the formally equivalent end of the spectrum to stay closer to the structure and wording of the original languages. This won't necessarily result in a better understanding of the text's meaning, but you'll have a better sense of how the original language presented the message. You can see structure and gain a closer view of what words were used originally, but you'll still need to decide what "*touch* a woman" means (1 Cor 7:1). Many teachers use several versions to see where translations differ and how best to interpret.

For devotional or more "daily guidance from Scripture" reading, a dynamic version might offer the best choice. This middle ground serves many Christians well. Readers have the best chance to grasp the intentions of the author and how those intentions apply to their own lives.

If you're a new Christian or are investigating the Bible for the first time, you might choose a paraphrased version that uses more modern wording and structures. Reading one of these versions can be less intimidating and more inviting for those unfamiliar with Scripture. It can also offer a refreshing change for a more mature Christian who wants to read familiar texts from a different point of view, perhaps devotionally or in some new regimen of reading. The MSG will pay rich dividends.

Most of us enjoy the blessing of abundance, and we can use several types of Bibles for various uses—whether they're on our shelves or online. We can access multiple versions on our computer screens or mobile apps where

we can easily toggle between versions. If your pastor tends to preach from one version, you might use that one in church; for a neighborhood Bible study, you might use another—or have several available for comparison; and for personal reading or study, still a third, or again, multiple versions. In fact, the use of several Bibles will help you see where differences in the translations occur and why the translators did what they did. Even more important than what version you select is the commitment to read and study the Bible consistently and with a commitment to put into practice what you learn (see Matt 7:24-27; Jas 2:22).