

APPENDIX 4

BIBLICAL SOURCES

How did we get our Bible?

As essential background to our detailed review of the account of the Nativity of the Lord Jesus, it is valuable to pause to look broadly at the documents from which we obtain virtually all our information about this event —at the Holy Bible itself. Why is this collection of books referred to as ‘holy’ by Christians? The answer is simply that the 66 separate books that make up the Bible as we have it are recognised as being a unique revelation by God of His dealings with mankind. The various Bible writers were, it is generally accepted in believing Christian circles (and, in relation to the Old Testament alone, accepted also in believing Jewish circles) inspired to write words that are from God and in that sense, *set apart* from all other writings of any sort. The word “holy” means variously, sacred, free from sin, set apart for God and pure. Most believing Christians, in spite of some difficulties with the Bible, would claim all these virtues for it.

John Stott, author of many books about the Holy Bible, writes in his excellent standard work *Understanding the Bible* that Christianity is essentially a historical religion, in the sense that God’s unique revelation of Himself was given in an unfolding historical situation, first through the Jewish nation and later through Jesus Christ. Stott points out that, although there is much history in the Bible, it does not claim to be an objective history book. He writes:

“A historian today is supposed to give a full and objective account of all the facts of his period. The biblical historians, however, made no such claim. On the contrary, they were regarded as the ‘former prophets’, for they were writing ‘sacred history’, the story of God’s dealings with a particular people, for a particular purpose.... So their record is more a testimony than a history. They were writing down their own confession of faith.

Therefore they were selective in their choice of material and (the secular historian would add) unbalanced in their presentation

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of it. For example, ancient Babylonia, Persia, Egypt, Greece and Rome – each a mighty empire and a rich civilisation – are only included as they impinge on the fortunes of Israel and Judah, two tiny buffer states on the edge of the Arabian desert, which hardly anybody had heard of. The great thinkers of Greece like Aristotle, Socrates and Plato are not so much as mentioned, nor are national heroes like Alexander the Great (except obliquely) and Julius Caesar. Instead, the scriptural record concentrates on men like Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah and the prophets to whom the word of God came, and on Jesus Christ, God’s Word made flesh. For the concern of Scripture is not with the wisdom, wealth or might of the world, but with the salvation of God. Biblical history is the story of salvation.”¹

The Old Testament is a collection of 39 books. The order in which they appear is not related necessarily to the date of writing or the date of subject matter, but is related to their literary genre. The three types of literature that dominate the Old Testament are history, prophecy and poetry. John Stott continues:

“Christians divide history into BC and AD, indicating the periods before and after Christ, believing that Jesus Christ’s coming into the world is the watershed of history. So too it is the life of Jesus Christ which divides the Bible into half, the Old Testament looking forward to his arrival and preparing for it, the New Testament telling the story of his life, death and resurrection and drawing out its implications as they begin to emerge in the infant church and will one day reach fruition.”

Origins

Even an atheist will probably concede that if God exists He will logically have made some arrangements for making Himself known to those He has created. Christians believe that God has revealed Himself uniquely to humans, first to the Jewish nation, whom He chose to be His covenant (or promise) people and then in the person of the Lord Jesus through whom all humans may have a personal relationship with God, as their Father.

The events described in the early chapters of the Bible, as God

began to make Himself known through Abraham and to embark upon His plan of salvation, started some time after 2,000 BC, probably between 2,000 and 1,800 BC. The question naturally arises, at what point did God begin to make provision for His revelation to be committed to writing? Some historians believe that there may have been God-*inspired* writings before the days of Moses (who lived circa 1,300 BC) but there are three principal objections to such a view:

Firstly, there is **no record** of any *inspired* writings before the time of Moses. Of the inspired writings in the Bible there are some clear records as to authorship, thus: “Moses then wrote down everything the Lord had said” (Ex 24: 4). Whilst there were undoubtedly holy men in those early days, such as Noah, Abraham and Joseph, with whom God had frequent communication, we nowhere read that any of them were inspired to write down what He said to them.

Secondly, there is **no reference** to such writings. From the days of Moses onwards, the inspired writings of the Bible were referred to constantly by prophets, priests and rulers as the final court of appeal (e.g. Ex 32: 8; Joshua 1: 8). The Lord Jesus Himself frequently referred to the Old Testament Scriptures in the familiar words: “it is written”. A natural inference would be that had there been any sacred writings in the days of Noah or Abraham, they would have referred to them.

Thirdly, there are **no remains** of any such writings. Had there been any such writings, it is unlikely they would have been allowed to disappear but, as divinely-inspired writings, would have found their way into the accepted canon of Scripture. As stated in Isaiah 40:8, “the word of our God stands forever.”

In spite of the fact that some words used in the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) have been identified by scholars as being not of Hebrew origin, but borrowed from an earlier language, it seems safe to conclude that there were no *inspired* writings prior to those we have in our Bible. This is perhaps surprising, even so, as there were uninspired writings of various kinds that pre-date the Bible, specimens of which have been discovered

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in Egypt and Babylonia, in the form of clay tablets with signs or letters impressed upon them. One of these is the remarkable pillar of black stone discovered in 1901 by Jacques de Morgan which contains the ‘code of Hammurabi of Babylon’ written in cuneiform writing. These laws bear some resemblance to Mosaic laws, but the writing dates back some 500 to 600 years before Moses, probably to the time of Abraham.

In the early days of God’s revelation to mankind, it appears He chose to make known His will verbally, in a direct and personal manner to individuals such as Adam (Gen 2:16), Cain (Gen 4:6), Noah (Gen 6:13), Abram (Gen 12:1), Abimelech (Gen 20:3), Isaac (Gen 26:2) and Job (Job 38:1). It is reasonable to assume that, in this way, God first instructed humans in the laws which were later embodied in the Pentateuch. For example, we read that, “Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock” before God as an offering —suggesting that God had already given clear instructions for the use of offerings. So we see that from the earliest times, humankind possessed, even without the Scriptures, some knowledge of God and His laws. This primitive knowledge, although dimmed and polluted over the course of time, has never completely died out, so that, everywhere on the face of this planet, even where no Bible has ever been seen, the worship of a Supreme Being, sometimes accompanied with sacrifice, is still practised.

With or without the Bible, there have always been two distinct and independent clues to the existence of God. First, the ‘natural’ world (see Psalm 19:1-3) and second the inbuilt knowledge of right and wrong, which we call conscience (see Rom 2:14-15). Whilst the ‘natural’ world strongly suggests that there is a creator-God who has created what we easily recognise as order, beauty and splendour, conscience can be so much abused as to render it practically inoperative. Hence there is a need for a separate written revelation of God as contained in the Bible, one which is trustworthy and able to be understood by all people. Christians believe, with very good reason, that this is what God has provided for us in the Bible.

On the question of the inspiration of the human authors of the Bible, John Stott again has some helpful insights:

“The process of inspiration was not a mechanical one. God did not treat the authors of Scripture as dictating machines or tape recorders, but as living and responsible persons. Sometimes he spoke to them in dreams and visions, sometimes by an audible voice, sometimes by angels. At other times we are not told how the word of God came to them. They may well not have been conscious of it at all. Thus in the case of Luke the evangelist, divine inspiration was certainly not incompatible with human research, for he tells us in the preface to his Gospel about the painstaking enquiries he had pursued. Whatever means of communication God employed in speaking to men, it never obliterated their own personality. On the contrary, as they wrote, their literary style and vocabulary were their own. So too – more important still – was their theme. It is not an accident that Amos was the prophet of God’s justice, Hosea of his love and Isaiah of his kingly sovereignty, nor that Paul was the apostle of faith and grace, James of works, John of love, and Peter of hope. The internal evidence, gathered from reading the biblical text, is that God made full use of the personality, temperament, background and experience of the biblical authors, in order to convey through each an appropriate and distinctive message.”²

The birth of the Bible

Man, when acting under conscience, failed God and continued to rebel against Him. This is amply shown in the whole episode of the Flood and Noah’s escape from it. Man’s sin is intolerable to a holy God. So God, in developing His plan of salvation, now brought mankind under LAW. It was some time shortly after 2,000 BC that God called Abram out of the idol-ridden surroundings of his native home (Gen 12:1; Joshua 24:2, 15), changed his name to Abraham and constituted him as head of a people (Gen 12:2; Gen 15:5) known as the Hebrews (or Jews). These God chose as his ‘treasured possession’ (Deut 14:2). God specially equipped the Hebrews over many hundreds of years, through many trials

and tribulations, so that they should in due course become a clear example to the rest of mankind and, significantly, the trustee of a revelation committed to writing (Rom 3:2). They were to be separated from all other peoples so that they might themselves first learn to “follow all the words of this law” (Deut 29:29) before spreading the blessings of their special heritage among all other nations (Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8).

About 500 years after the call of Abram (c. 1300 BC) the time came for the first part of God’s revelation to be committed to writing. This would encompass a history spanning at least the preceding 3,000 years and includes the necessary account of Creation. For this purpose Moses, who had been prepared in a very remarkable way and at some real personal cost (see Heb 11:24-28) for this supremely important work, was chosen to begin these sacred writings. The first reference to such writing in the Bible is Exodus 17:14 where God commanded Moses to “write on a scroll” the story of the battle with the Amalekites. Here it was, then, possibly on Mount Sinai, that the Holy Bible was begun. These writings were continued by other holy men – prophets and apostles – as they were guided by the Holy Spirit from time to time (2 Peter 1:21) until the revelation of God was complete and a library of 66 books had been secured —the history of salvation.

Original manuscripts

It is a fact that of all the sacred writings there are no *original* manuscripts, so far as is known. With regard to the Old Testament manuscripts in particular, as they became old and worn, they were reverently buried by the Hebrew priests, who ensured that reliable copies were made to use as replacements. Original manuscripts were undoubtedly lost during the frequent wars and persecutions to which the people of God were subjected. Even the New Testament original manuscripts are not available, so the Bible we have today is translated from Hebrew copies, and copies of Greek translations of early Hebrew documents. Whilst this raises obvious questions about the reliability of copies and of translations, we might *first* reflect on the possibility that, in ensuring that there are no original

documents left, we see the providential hand of God. Had any original documents bearing the handwriting of Moses, David, Isaiah, Daniel, Paul or John survived, then men and women might easily have been swayed by superstition and begun to worship the writings as a sort of idol, instead of the God who first provided them. This would have run counter to one of God's first priorities, to lead mankind away from idols

There are in existence today some 25,000 Hebrew and Greek manuscripts of the Old and New Testament Scriptures (which compares with some 643 manuscripts of the next most numerous ancient work, Homer's *Iliad*) which have been copied periodically from other manuscripts. These are the 'original' manuscripts to which scholars now refer. They are preserved in the great public libraries of the world as well as in some private collections. These manuscripts can be sub-divided as follows:

- * Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament —the earliest of which date back to about 800 AD.
- * Greek manuscripts of the New Testament —the earliest of these date back to the early second century AD.
- * Greek manuscripts of the Old Testament (known as the Septuagint) translated from Hebrew manuscripts themselves dated about 277 BC —the earliest surviving copies of these date back to the third century A.D.

Ancient Jewish scribes, as they made copies of the Scriptures which are the precious heritage of today's church, exercised the greatest possible care in this work – even to the point of superstition – counting not only the words but also every letter, noting how many times each letter occurred and destroying immediately any sheet on which a mistake was detected. All this, in their anxiety not to introduce any error into the sacred Scriptures. Each new copy had to be made from an approved manuscript, written with a special kind of ink, upon sheets made from the skin of ritually "clean" animals. The writers also had to pronounce aloud each word before writing it and on no account was any word to be written from memory. The scribes were reverently to wipe their pen before writing the name of God and to wash their whole body

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before writing the sacred word which we now render as 'Jehovah', lest that holy word should be tainted even in the writing. The new copy was then exhaustively compared with the original. It is said that if only one incorrect letter was discovered, the whole copy was rejected! Such was the quality control of those entrusted with copying the Scriptures!

Even so, mistakes did occasionally creep in, such as the age of Ahaziah when he began to reign as King of Judah, which in 2 Kings 8:26 is given as twenty two years whilst 2 Chronicles 22:2, in some versions, says he was forty-two years old. The early documents available do not help to resolve this, indicating the discrepancy is due to an error of a very early copyist. The suggestion is that this copyist, in trying to avoid introducing a new error whilst correcting an earlier one, decided to perpetuate the earlier one! The mistake was understandable, however, as the Hebrews used letters to express numbers and the ancient letter for forty was so similar to that for twenty that they might easily be confused. The age of twenty-two given in 2 Kings is the correct one, and no doubt that was the number originally written by the inspired writers, because the age of forty-two would mean that Ahaziah was born two years before his father who died at the age of forty (2 Kings 8:17.)³

Since many thousands of ancient manuscripts have survived (and in this fact Christians again see the providential hand of God) whether in whole or in part, it is plain to see that a copyist's mistake in one is easily detectable by reference to the correct reading of the same passage in other manuscripts. We can confidently say, then, that although the manuscripts are only copies, scholars are able to arrive at the exact words of the Scriptures, as originally inspired by God. It might be added that this is backed up by numerous quotations from the Scriptures in non-biblical writings through which further verification can be gained.

Language

It is assumed by many scholars that when Abram left Ur of the Chaldees and came at God's direction to the land of Canaan (Gen 12:1-5) he adopted the language of the Canaanites among whom he had come to live and whose land he was ultimately to possess (Gen 12:7). Similarly, the exiled Jews during their captivity in Babylon discarded their own pure Hebrew and adopted the Chaldean or Aramaic language, which continued to be the common tongue until the time of Christ. If the assumption that Abram adopted the Canaanite language is correct, then the language he adopted would eventually have become what was later thought of as Hebrew. Indeed in Isaiah 19:18 there is a strong suggestion that the language of the Hebrews was actually called "the language of Canaan" for a time.

The name "Hebrew" probably came from Heber, a descendant of Shem and ancestor of Abraham. The name is mentioned in the genealogy of the Lord Jesus in Luke 3:35, where it is actually rendered 'Eber' in the more modern translations but 'Heber' in, for example, the Authorised King James Version of the Bible. Heber means 'crosser' as in crossing from one place to another. An equivalent modern word might be emigrant—a characteristic which has clung to the Jewish people through the ages. In Genesis 48:15, when Jacob blessed Joseph, he referred to 'the God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked'. Here, the word walked could be rendered 'walked about' or 'wandered'. Certainly the word Hebrew became associated with Abraham and his descendants. As noted earlier, the Hebrew language was used by the Jewish nation until the captivity in Babylon, when Aramaic was adopted. Obviously, then, most of the Old Testament, and all of the earlier parts of it, was originally written in Hebrew.

Not so, the New Testament. Jews in the time of Christ spoke mainly Aramaic, but the Greek language—the common administrative and trading language of the Roman world—became more and more used as time went on so that, when the New Testament was written, it was written without exception, in Greek.⁴ The Greek of the New Testament, however, differs from the Greek

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of the classical writers. It is the commonest dialect which spread over the Near East as a result of the conquests of Alexander the Great, some 300 years before Christ. New Testament Greek was spoken by the *Hellenists*, or Greek-speaking Jews, who for business and other reasons made their homes in the area. It could be easily understood by persons acquainted with the classical language, but more importantly, could easily be understood as the everyday common language of the people. This is, perhaps, the strongest justification today for the periodic updating of the Bible into the language of ordinary people —to be as easily understood by the modern ‘man in the street’ as were the original Gospels and epistles to ordinary people of New Testament times. Such translation, of course, must remain true to the original text. All modern mainstream translations of the Holy Bible contain a detailed statement of the manner of translation and source texts used, normally as a ‘preface’ to the Bible itself.

Translations

The Holy Bible we have today is the result of the work of devout and dedicated teams of translators who have worked tirelessly and often at great personal risk or discomfort to themselves. The earliest translators had the advantage of undertaking their work using very early documents which have since been lost. More recent translators have had the advantage of using more numerous documents discovered even as late as the twentieth century, such as the *Dead Sea scrolls*, which were not available to their predecessors. (Again, most Christians would see the providential hand of God in making available fresh corroborative manuscripts down through the passage of history, thus ensuring that the Bible itself can continue to be subjected, and successfully subjected, to the most rigorous literary and scholastic criticism)

The Septuagint (or LXX)

About 270 BC, a little over 100 years after the close of the Old Testament canon, a Greek translation of the Old Testament Scriptures was made. Scholars know that this was complete by

221 BC, as a reference to the document is made the apocryphal ‘Wisdom of Jesus the son of Serach’ where the translation is stated as being complete during the reign of an Egyptian king known to be alive at that time.⁵ The translation was probably made for those Jews who had been scattered abroad by the dispersion and had adopted the Greek language in place of Hebrew which by this time amongst the Jews of the dispersion had been almost completely forgotten. The Septuagint was a poor translation—in fact, so poor that the Gospel and other New Testament writers when quoting from the Old Testament, did not use it, preferring (it appears) to use the Hebrew versions available at the time.

The text of the Septuagint is contained in a number of early manuscripts. The most important of these are the Codex Vaticanus (B) and the Codex Sinaiticus (S) both dating from the fourth century AD, and the Codex Alexandrinus (A) from the fifth century. There are also many earlier papyrus fragments and numerous later manuscripts. Christians see the providence of God at work again in the fact that the three main versions (B), (S), and (A) have been lodged among the three great traditions of the professing Christian church, viz the Vaticanus version as its name suggests is in the Vatican, the seat of the Roman Catholic Church, where it has been for over five hundred years; the Sinaiticus is in the possession of the Greek Church, and the Alexandrinus is in the British Museum, London, an important centre of the Protestant tradition. The first printed copy of the Septuagint was in the Complutensian Polyglot (1514-22).

The importance of the Greek language Septuagint, insofar as the early Christian writers used Greek, was that in the Septuagint translation these Christians located the Old Testament prophecies which pointed to the birth, life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Jews considered this to be, as many still do, a misuse of Scripture and so ceased to use the Septuagint. Its subsequent history and use lay with the Christian church. The Septuagint also provides some measure of independent verification of the older Hebrew Old Testament texts and subsequent translations of it.

The Vulgate

In the second century AD Latin superseded Greek and remained for many centuries the diplomatic language of Europe. In 382 AD Pope Damasus commissioned Jerome,⁶ the leading biblical scholar of his day, to produce a Latin version of the Bible from the various translations then in use. Jerome moved to Palestine to make a first-hand study, and his revised Latin version of the Gospels appeared in about 383. Jerome initially used the Septuagint for the Old Testament parts of the Bible but later translated the entire Old Testament from original Hebrew versions, a process completed after some twenty years about 405 to 410. From the mid-sixth century the complete Bible, contained between two covers, came into common use. It is known still as the Vulgate, from the Latin word meaning “to make common or public” and from which the English derive their word “vulgar”.

In 1546 the Roman Catholic Council of Trent decreed that the Vulgate was to be the exclusive Latin authority for the Bible and the Vulgate was republished in 1592, removing some earlier errors.

Anglo-Saxon and English translations

During what has become known as the Dark Ages, access to the Holy Bible was restricted first by language, as Latin was the preserve of scholars and the ruling class, and second by simple non-availability. In spite of this, Christianity made headway in Europe and paganism slowly died out. In the seventh century a man in England named Caedmon wrote a paraphrase of parts of the Bible, but it was not until the eighth century that the Venerable Bede of Jarrow (b. c. 673; d. c. 735), a significant literary figure in England at the time, translated the Psalms and the Gospels into Anglo-Saxon. He died before he could translate the rest of the Bible. In AD 871 Alfred the Great was crowned King of the West Saxons, and in 893 nominally King of all England. He instituted a translation of the Bible into Anglo-Saxon but, like Bede, died before the work was completed.

About the year 1330 was born John Wycliffe, an important

early reformer of the English Church. He was the first to translate the whole Bible into the English language – a task that took some twenty-two years – and made his translation from the Latin Vulgate, as Hebrew and Greek originals at this time were virtually unobtainable. The translator was much opposed by the Catholic Church and there began a long period of violent opposition to the translation of the Bible into the common tongue. Wycliffe himself died peacefully, however, in 1384.

Printing was invented by Johannes Gutenberg in Mainz (now in Germany) in 1450 and was introduced to England by William Caxton in 1476, about which time parts of the Old Testament were printed in Hebrew. In 1516 Desiderius Erasmus, a learned Greek scholar, published in Basel a Greek New Testament translated direct from ancient manuscripts. This edition was to be of great value to future translators, as for some centuries the only ‘original’ documents available had been Latin translations.

In 1525 William Tyndale, one of the great Protestant reformers, prepared a fresh English translation from Erasmus’s Greek translation. Tyndale is distinguished for being the first to publish in print an English New Testament. He went on to translate the Pentateuch and Jonah into English as well. All this work was accomplished at immense personal difficulty owing to opposition from the Roman authorities in England, and was largely carried out in exile and virtual poverty, initially in Cologne and later at Worms. Thousands of his translations were smuggled into England, but in 1536, having returned to England, Tyndale was executed by being burned at the stake. Ironically, in the same year King Henry VIII, although at this time still a Roman Catholic, granted a royal licence for the issue of a Bible in the English language and this became available a year later.

Bible in chapter and verse divisions

In 1250 Cardinal Hugo became the first to divide the Bible into chapters. His occasionally arbitrary divisions have been followed ever since. The sub-division into verses was not accomplished for another three hundred years, however. It was in 1551 in England

that Sir Robert Stephens divided a new translation of the Greek New Testament into verses. The 1550s were violent times in England during the reign of Mary Queen of Scots and many Protestant reformers were executed. As part of the attempt to crush the Protestant church in England, the printing, importation and circulation of the Bible was prohibited. One version of the New Testament was, however, published during the reign of Mary—and this was the first English edition divided into verses, as arranged by Sir Robert Stephens.

In 1558 Queen Elizabeth I ascended the English throne and the Protestant church became again ascendant. Two years later, in 1560, the *Geneva Bible* was published in England, so named because it had been prepared by the Protestant reformers in Geneva, where many had fled during the persecutions under Queen Mary. This version, as it happens, was the first Bible in which *italics* were used to indicate words not in the original, it was the first in which the whole Bible was divided into verses and it was the first to omit the apocryphal books since their introduction into the Septuagint in the fourth century.

The Douay-Rhemish Bible and the English Authorised Bible

In 1610 the Roman Catholic authorities issued the Douay-Rhemish Bible, being a revised translation from the Latin Vulgate originally translated by Jerome. Its name was derived from the fact that the Old Testament was translated at Douay and the New Testament at Rheims. In the Catholic fashion it also included the apocryphal books which were now considered to be part of the Roman Catholic canon of Scripture.

By the beginning of the seventeenth century there were a number of good – but old – Bible translations in use in England. The English language was changing and evolving and there was an evident and growing need for a fresh translation. Under the patronage of King James I of England, fifty-four translators were assembled to undertake this project. These scholars, using Greek originals and other ancient documents for reference, in a period of five years translated and then published (in 1611) what is still

published as the Authorised King James Version. In this version, marginal notes were adopted, which have proved so helpful to Bible readers and students alike. Whilst this *was* a scholarly translation and is still loved by readers today, a dispassionate observer would note that it was based on Greek texts (essentially the Greek text of the New Testament edited by Beza in 1589, who closely followed that published by Erasmus 1516-1535) which themselves contained errors. The earliest and best of the manuscripts used by Erasmus was from the tenth century and, whilst Beza had access to good manuscripts from the fifth and sixth centuries, he made little use of them because they differed from the text translated by Erasmus! Nevertheless, the Authorised Version was in its time a good translation. For two and a half centuries no further authorised translations were made into the English language.

Recent translations

Of course, in Bible history ‘recent’ is a relative word. The survey above considers the major versions of the Holy Bible through the first millennium and into the first half of the second millennium. As language changed and developed, and as fresh and often older source documents in the form of original manuscripts became available, and with the Bible itself being at the heart of the teaching of a number of the Protestant denominations, the need for a newer revision of the Bible was evident in the mid nineteenth century.

During the Victorian era in Britain, many fresh manuscripts became available to scholars and the task of revision was undertaken with the authority of the Church of England in 1870. The English Revised Version was published between 1881-85 and the American Standard Version, embodying some preferences of American scholars, was published in 1901.

Because of difficulties caused by unauthorised publications over the last two decades of the nineteenth century, especially tampering with the English Revised Version to the requirements of various cults that were emerging at the time, the American Standard Version was copyrighted in 1901 to protect the text from

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unauthorised amendment. In 1928 this copyright was acquired by the International Council of Religious Education and thereby into the 'ownership' of American and Canadian churches which were associated with the Council. The Council appointed a committee of scholars to make enquiry as to whether further revision was necessary, and in 1937 such a revision was authorised by a vote of the Council. This directed that the resulting translation should "embody the best results of modern scholarship as to the meaning of the Scriptures, and express this meaning in English diction which is designed for use in public and private worship..."

Translation was undertaken by an appointed Committee, working in two groups, one responsible for the Old Testament and one for the New Testament. Each group submitted its work to the scrutiny of the other and the charter of the Committee required that all changes must have a two-thirds vote of the total membership of the Committee. In this way, a very good measure of 'quality control' was ensured. The Revised Standard Version of the New Testament was published in 1946 and the whole Bible in 1951.

In the latter part of the twentieth century one version of the Bible has won a very wide measure of acceptance throughout the world and can now be described as the yardstick by which other translations are measured. The *New International Version* was a completely new translation made by over one hundred scholars working directly from the best available Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek manuscripts. In 1965, following several years of exploratory discussions by committees from the Christian Reformed Church and the National Association of Evangelicals in the USA, a group of Scholars gathered at Palos Heights, Illinois, and agreed the need for a new translation in contemporary English. In the words of the Preface to the New International Version:

"Responsibility for the new version was delegated by the Palos Heights group to a self-governing body of fifteen, the Committee on Bible Translation, composed for the most part of biblical scholars from colleges, universities and seminaries. In 1967 the New York Bible Society (now the International Bible Society) generously undertook the financial sponsorship of the project

—a sponsorship that made it possible to enlist the help of many distinguished scholars. The fact that participants from the United States, Great Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand worked together gave the project its international scope. That they were from many denominations – including Anglican, Assemblies of God, Baptist, Brethren, Christian Reformed, Church of Christ, Evangelical Free, Lutheran, Mennonite, Methodist, Nazarene, Presbyterian, Wesleyan and other churches – helped to safeguard the translation from sectarian bias.

The translation of each book was assigned to a team of scholars. Next, one of the Intermediate Editorial Committees revised the initial translation, with constant reference to the Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek. Their work then went to one of the General Editorial Committees, which checked it in detail and made another thorough revision. The revision in turn was carefully reviewed by the committee on Bible Translation, which made further changes and then released the final version for publication. In this way the entire Bible underwent three revisions, during each of which the translation was examined for its faithfulness to the original languages and for its English style.”

The New International Version explains in some detail how the work was undertaken and the Preface is well worth reading in its own right! Towards the latter end of the twentieth century a large number of ‘contemporary’ versions of the Bible were published. Some, it is true, fulfilled a real need in a society where for many, the Holy Bible is completely unknown and reading skills are in decline. Others err towards various types of ‘political correctness’ or are market-driven and are to that extent poor translations which will not pass the test of time. Yet others, issued by non-Christian cults, are designed to deceive. Bible readers should check on the translation they are using and use only well recognised versions. The biblical quotations and extracts used in the series of studies on the birth of Christ are from the New International Version.

Conclusion

Since we obtain virtually all our information about the Lord Jesus from the pages of the Holy Bible, it is valuable to have a clear idea of how we obtained the Bible we currently use, as the brief survey in this appendix has sought to do. Critics of Christianity generally look to discredit the Bible as the source of information about Jesus, and consequently methods of translation and source material often come under scrutiny. It must be said that much of the detail in the attack upon the Bible emerges from either poor scholarship (or no scholarship!) and/or present only information that supports a particular viewpoint. To the uninitiated, so-called biblical criticism may at first sight appear to be persuasive. Christians argue that much of this literary, historic and scholastic criticism is in fact pretty weak stuff, and many Christians have taken pains to present the correct and truthful biblical answer to all of the criticisms from time to time put forward. Not everyone, it must be said, is prepared to look at the Christian viewpoint—not with any real openness of mind, at any rate.

This is sad, but not something that should unduly perturb Christians. Allowing that the Bible is truth, and Jesus, in His own words, “the way, the truth and the life” (John 14:6), it should not be surprising that such truth should come under constant attack. Such attack may come from the lips (or the pens!) of men, but ultimately it originates always with the devil. As the Lord Jesus said, “He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44).

The Holy Bible has come under greater ‘scholastic’ criticism and investigation than any other book in history, but has not been found wanting. The very fact of its continued existence is testimony to its Divine inspiration and the Divine intervention at many points in history to ensure its existence and continued availability. The Nazis burned Bibles in public places, yet the ‘Third Reich’ which was supposed to last for a thousand years lasted just twelve. The Bible, which they tried to destroy, traces its history back four thousand years. It might be observed that

Communism, which sought to crush the Bible and create an atheist state, lasted just seventy years and the final vestiges of the Communist religion are likely to die out in the early part of the third millennium. The *father of lies* may well have prepared something to replace Communism and Fascism, and it seems certain that the Bible and those who live by it will continue to face pressure in the years ahead.

Allowing that the Bible we have today is a true representation of the (inspired) words originally given through the prophets and apostles, there remains one last major area of legitimate concern. Were those words truly inspired? Were *all* those words inspired? Just *how* reliable were the original witnesses? This is particularly important in terms of the New Testament and the subject of this series of studies —the Nativity of the Lord Jesus. It is to this subject we turn our attention in Appendix 5.

Notes

¹ John Stott *Understanding The Bible* Revised Edition (Hodder & Stoughton, 1972), p. 45.

² *Ibid.* p. 140.

³ The New International Version corrects this in the text of 2 Chronicles 22:2, but includes a footnote stating that some early manuscripts use the figure of forty two.

⁴ Although some scholars have suggested that the original of Matthew's Gospel may have been written first in Hebrew and subsequently translated into Greek.

⁵ A full discussion of the Septuagint is found in *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah. Op. cit.* Book 1, Chapter 2

⁶ Sometimes known as "Saint Jerome" (b. c. 347 d c. 419/420) whose Latin name was EUSEBIUS HIERONYMOUS.

