

How we got the Bible

So extensive are these citations (from the church fathers) that if all other sources for our knowledge of the text of the New Testament were destroyed, they would be sufficient alone in reconstructing practically the entire New Testament – Bruce Metzger

"Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away." Matt. 24:35

We have stated that the Christian makes two assumptions – first that there is a God and second is that the Bible is His word. The bible, however, is an old book written in Hebrew and Greek – how can I know that I have the word of God and that the text has not be corrupted? Do all of the different versions show that we can't really know what the Bible says because even the scholars disagree? These are all valid questions to which we owe an answer. In later lessons we will discuss why we believe the Bible is the word of God, but in this lesson we want to show that the book which we call the Bible is a reliable document

1. Do we have the text of what the original authors wrote? We do not have any of the original copies of the books of either the Old or New Testaments but when compared to other books of antiquity, there are many more documents available to determine what the original looked like.

The first thing to consider with documents this old is how many copies can we find and how much later is the copy than the original document. In the following table, we can compare the New Testament with some early documents.

Book/Date	Number of documents available for comparison	Years of earliest manuscript we have after the original
Illiad by Homer/700 BC	1757	1800 years
Oedipus by Sophocles/450 BC	193	100 years (fragments)
Gallic wars – Caesar/50 BC	251	1000 years
Annals – Tacitus/100 AD	31	750 years
New Testament 50-100 AD	5795	40 years

Source: <https://www.equip.org/articles/the-bibliographical-test-updated/>

Sir David Dalrymple claimed to have found all but 11 verses of the New Testament in quotations from the second and third centuries.

The number for New Testament does not include different translations of the document into other languages. As an example, there are over 2500 copies of Armenian translations of the bible with the earliest dating to 887AD. There are over 10,000 Latin vulgate manuscripts which have been found.

Another comparison is stated by the Josh McDowell Team "Of just the known 5,800+ Greek New Testament manuscripts, there are more than 2.6 million pages! That equates to one mile of New Testament manuscripts (and 2.5 miles for the entire Bible), *compared with an average four feet of manuscript by the average classical writer.* Combining both the Old and New Testament, we have more

than 66,000 manuscripts and scrolls that speak to the validity of Scripture!”

<https://www.josh.org/manuscript-validate-old-testament/#:~:text=That%20equates%20to%20one%20mile%20of%20New%20Testament,scrolls%20that%20speak%20to%20the%20validity%20of%20Scripture%21>

2. What about different translations – how do they vary from the original language texts? Translations have been divided into 3 categories – there are “word-for-word” translations, “meaning-for-meaning” translations and paraphrases. There are value in all three, but when we are trying to determine exactly what God has said to us the word-for-word translations should be used. In the other two, the writers are giving their “sense” to the text and while easier to understand, it contains the translator’s biases. The King James Version and the New King James versions are two well respected word-for-word translations. A comparison of these versions to the original language manuscripts is shown in the following:

“About 98 percent of the known Greek manuscripts agree with the basic text of the King James Bible. Even the variations that do exist rarely affect the basic meaning in the remaining 2 percent of those manuscripts.” “What's the Difference Between Various Bible Versions?” <https://www.ucg.org/the-good-news/whats-the-difference-between-various-bible-versions>

3. Who decides what books are to be included in the Bible? - When the New Testament was written and shortly thereafter, there were a number of documents written which claimed religious authority. A list of books accepted as the Word of God was necessary and some criteria for inclusion needed to be defined.

- a. We know that the Lord gave the apostles authority (Matt 28:18-19, John 14:25-26), so their writings are the word of God. Thus, if a book was written by an apostle or prophet it was included.
- b. Was the writer confirmed by an act of God? Moses, for example, worked miracles.
- c. Did the message tell the truth about God.
- d. Was it accepted by the people as the word of God? (I Thess. 2:13)

For much of history, the bible was in the hands of the clergy. The Catholic church allowed translations into Latin but only highly educated people could read it. It was not available to the public. The church did not want the bible translated into other languages because they thought that if it were available to all, people would not think highly of it. The “unlearned” might make mistakes in understanding its meaning, so it had to be interpreted by experts.

English translations -

John Wycliffe (1324-1384) Sent priests out to preach to the people in English instead of Latin. First translation into English from the Latin Vulgate in 1382. For his work, he was called an “anti-Christ” by the Catholic hierarchy.

The invention of the printing press in 1450 speeded the process. This eliminated errors caused by hand copying.

William Tyndale – Used the Hebrew and Greek texts in addition to the Latin. He was refused permission to translate the Bible in England. He issued the first printed New Testament in 1525. He was declared a heretic, and burned at the stake in 1536.

Miles Coverdale – Gave the world the first complete printed Bible in 1535 and he relied heavily on Tyndale.

In 1543 the English Parliament restricted the use of the English bible to specific classes of people which excluded 90% of the population.

The Geneva bible -Largely based on the work of Tyndall and was largely written by William Whittingham (John Calvin's brother-in-law). It was widely used by the Pilgrims and many famous preachers of the day. It went through 140 editions before the King James Version issued.

Bishop's bible 1568 – A revision of the Geneva Bible made by bishops of the Church of England

The Douay Version 1609 – This was translated by the Catholics which was translated from the Latin.

The King James version – 1611 This was ordered by King James as a revision of the Bishop's Bible.