



Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne For the Life of the World

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The Story of the Old Testament

By Dean O. Wenthe

How Did We Get the New Testament?

By Charles A. Gieschen

The Text of the Bible— Where Did It Come From?

By Cameron A. MacKenzie

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The important and vital role of the Old Testament in God's revelation remains for the church today. It is God's word for God's people. To understand Jesus rightly, it is crucial to know what it means to be "the second Adam, Abram's seed, David's seed, the Paschal Lamb, the Messiah, the Suffering Servant, the Son of Man" and to understand the nature of God's redemptive plan.

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When we look at our leather-bound copy of the Bible, we may wonder how the 27 different writings that make up the New Testament ended up there. It is important to realize that we did not receive the New Testament through a simple process. An edited and bound copy of the New Testament did not drop to earth from God in heaven shortly after Jesus ascended.

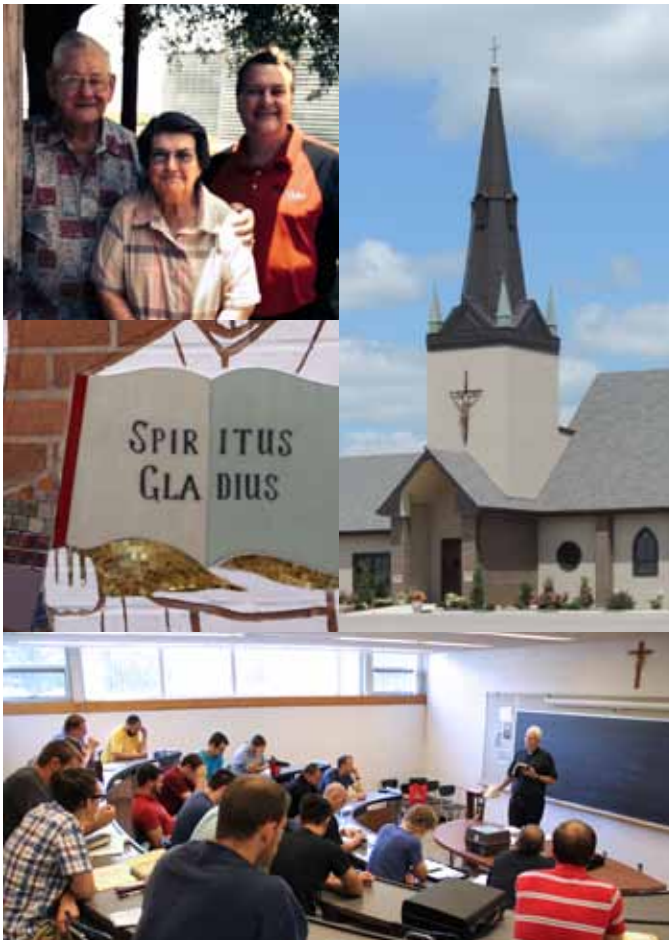
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One can demonstrate the doctrines of our faith from modern Bibles as well as from the older versions. But, it's still true that all Bibles are not created equal. So we need our seminaries to continue training men who can make sense out of what's going on in textual criticism and translation theory. They can help the rest of us differentiate between "good" Bibles and "not so good" ones.

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How Did We Get the New Testament?

By Charles A. Gieschen

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An interesting aspect of the New Testament writings is that they are not organized chronologically according to when they were written, but the four historical books that record the life and ministry of Jesus are given pride of place.

When we look at our leather-bound copy of the Bible, we may wonder how the 27 different writings that make up the New Testament ended up there. It is important to realize that we did not receive the New Testament through a simple process. An edited and bound copy of the New Testament did not drop to earth from God in heaven shortly after Jesus ascended. Like the Old Testament Scriptures, the various writings that make up what we call “the New Testament” were written by several different authors in Greek in different situations and at different times. Unlike the Old Testament, however, the window in which New Testament writings were written is only a few decades (primarily A.D. 50-70), much narrower than the centuries that separate Moses from Malachi. Like the Old Testament, there is also some variety to the type of writings found in the New Testament, primarily historical writings (the four Gospels and Acts) and letters (the various Epistles) but also one visionary prophecy (Revelation).

Why are letters such a prominent part of the New Testament writings? The number of letters in the New Testament reflects the missionary nature of the earliest church. Vital apostolic preaching and teaching were given not only by the physical presence of apostles like Peter and Paul, but also by their written message in letters, often penned to address concerns that arose after the establishment of a new congregation and the departure of the apostle who founded the congregation.

An interesting aspect of the New Testament writings is that they are not organized chronologically according to when they were written, but the four historical books that record the life and ministry of Jesus are given pride of place. This is very understandable for two primary reasons. First, the story of Jesus, especially His atoning death and resurrection for the salvation of the world, is the foundation of all the rest of the writings of the New Testament. Second, these four books are especially closely linked to the Old Testament since Jesus is understood as a fulfillment of many of the promises in the Old Testament. A person who reads the four Gospels for the first time may also wonder why there are multiple Gospels, three of which have significant content similarities (Matthew, Mark and Luke are known as the synoptic Gospels). The fact that there are four accounts of Jesus' earthly ministry testifies to the centrality of the life of Jesus in the preaching and teaching of the earliest Christians, for each of these Gospels reflects what was being preached and taught about Jesus in

the years leading up to the actual writing of these Gospels by eyewitnesses (e.g., apostles Matthew and John) or by those who drew on eyewitness testimony (e.g., Mark and Luke).

Although the Acts of the Apostles is Luke's sequel to his Gospel, it is positioned after the Gospels and before the Pauline Epistles because it helpfully introduces the history of early Christianity, especially the Gentile mission led by the Apostle Paul. Luke was concerned to tell not only the story of Jesus but also the continuation of that story in the early decades of Christianity. From the historical narrative of Acts, one can then understand more about when and where Paul wrote his many letters, which are organized in the New Testament more by length than chronology (e.g., 1-2 Thessalonians are among the earliest of Paul's letters, but follow several later and longer letters).

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and teaching were given not only by the physical presence of apostles like Peter and Paul, but also by their written message in letters, often penned to address concerns that arose after the establishment of a new congregation and the departure of the apostle who founded the congregation. In the many letters of the New Testament, we have windows into the lives of early Christians in specific congregations, giving us concrete examples of how the apostles preached and taught pastorally in specific contexts, especially how they proclaimed the Gospel of our Lord Jesus in the decades immediately following His death and resurrection.

There are skeptics who state that we cannot know what the text of the New Testament writings is because the original Greek text of the individual New Testament writings were copied repeatedly and were changed by copyists over time, and none of our many manuscripts can be dated to the first century (e.g., the infamous Bart Ehrman). The intentional and unintentional changes made by copyists do not mean that we have an unreliable text upon which to base our English translations. In fact, the abundance of manuscript evidence allows us to have a very reliable understanding of what the original reading of the text was and how changes came about. It is proper to say that we have more evidence for the Greek text of the New Testament than we have for any other first century A.D. writing!

Some are under the mistaken impression that there were many other authoritative writings in early Christianity, but that later Christians determined what was authoritative (i.e., in the canon of the New Testament) and what was not. Although Athanasius did list which books were considered to be the Scriptures of the New Testament in his *39th Paschal Letter* (A.D. 367), he is simply reflecting what the church had already acknowledged by its faithful reading and study of these writings since the late first century, even though most of the writings were universally accepted

(*homologoumena*; e.g., the four Gospels) while the authorship or authority of a few were questioned by some (*antilegomena*; e.g., the book of Revelation). Neither one individual nor a council decided what was in and what was out; the faithful of the church recognized these authentic and authoritative writings through their use of them from the time that they were first received. The reason that a canonical list of books became more important in the fourth century is because many falsely-attributed and heretical Gospels and other writings began to appear in the second and third centuries whose content contradicted the writings of the New Testament (e.g., the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of Judas*).

What is the role of the Holy Spirit in bringing the New Testament to us? Like with the Old Testament writers, we believe that the Holy Spirit inspired the individuals who wrote the books of the New Testament so that we can even say that the Holy Spirit is the ultimate author of these writings and that everything in them is the word of God (e.g., 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21). The apostles themselves recognized the authority of the message that they proclaimed and wrote as none other than “the word of God” (e.g., 1 Thess. 2:13). Yet, the Holy Spirit was active in this process long before the actual writing took place. The Holy Spirit was active and at work in the life and ministry of Jesus and also in the apostles’ preaching of Jesus’ deeds and words, testimony which culminated in their writings. The story of the New Testament is not a simple one. It reflects how God works in history through human beings to testify to His salvific words and deeds in Jesus Christ so that future generations, like us, can hear and see them anew! 📖

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