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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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Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture verses are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

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By Dean O. Wenthe

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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The Text of the Bible

Where Did It Come From?

By Cameron A. MacKenzie

Have you ever shopped for a Bible? It's not as easy as you might think. Bibles differ greatly in format (large or small, green or gray, etc.) and in what accompanies the text (study Bible or plain text, evangelical or liberal, etc.). They even vary in the text itself. Do you want the New International Version, Revised Standard Version or King James Version? If you're old enough, you may remember when each of these versions was current in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. And that list leaves out a ton of others like the Good News Bible or the Living Translation. Today we use the English Standard Version. Each of these Bibles is a unique translation of the original text, Hebrew for the Old Testament and Greek for the New Testament.



Detail from The Descent from the Cross by Raphael (1483-1520).

Translations vary for a lot of reasons. Some are better, some worse in terms of care and quality. There are also questions of English style. If you're aiming at those for whom English is a second language, you want simple words and short sentences. But lifelong English-speakers can handle complicated sentences and challenging vocabulary. There are also differences in translation philosophy. Do you want a translation that sounds like ordinary American English or one that retains the flavor of the original? For example, do you want to hear "and it came to pass" when the Bible is read or should we just leave it out because that's not the way we talk?

There are also issues of theology. Some translators, for example, do not believe in direct Old Testament prophecy fulfilled in the New Testament. Their handling of such passages will be much different from those who believe the opposite. Others want to mute differences between men and women, so they translate fathers as parents, and brothers as brothers and sisters. So Christians have to be careful when they choose a translation. Not just any old Bible will do.

Here's another wrinkle. We said that all Bibles are translations of the original text. But did you know that translators also debate what is the original Hebrew or Greek? In fact, at the time of the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church declared the Latin text of the Bible authentic Scripture, so that up until the middle of the 20th century, Catholic and Protestant Bibles were different on account of the text they were translating. In the Old Testament, that resulted in seven extra books—the so-called Apocrypha. In the New Testament, it meant some noteworthy differences in certain passages, like the ending to the Lord's Prayer, "For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen" (Matt. 6:13). Protestants had it, Catholics did not.

But that particular fight is long gone and Catholics now translate the Hebrew and Greek just like the Protestants (although they still include the Apocrypha). But here's another oddity—the ending to the Lord's Prayer is now missing from modern Protestant Bibles! And that's not the only passage. If you look at your Bible, every so often you'll find a missing verse number. For example, John 5:4 (about the angel at



In view of all the challenges in determining the original text, to say nothing of translating it, the question arises, can we trust our Bibles? The answer is certainly yes. Our Lord Himself promised to preserve His Word (Matt. 24:35), and He does not lie. In fact, one can demonstrate the doctrines of our faith from modern Bibles as well as from the older versions.

the pool of Bethesda) and Acts 8:37 (the eunuch's confession before baptism). Meanwhile, the New Revised Standard Version has added an extra paragraph at the end of 1 Samuel 10 about the cruelty of Nahash, king of the Ammonites. So what is going on here?

Just this, the *original* manuscripts of the Bible no longer exist. This means that when it comes to translating Romans—or any other book—we cannot just look at what St. Paul wrote. Instead, we have to figure it out on the basis of *copies*—multiple copies—of what he wrote in

the first place. For hundreds of years (thousands in the case of parts of the Old Testament), the books of the Bible passed down from one generation of believers to the next by means of handwritten copies called manuscripts. These need to be sorted and analyzed as best we can in order to reconstruct the original.

In the 16th century, when Luther and his Protestant successors prepared the first wave of Bibles in the language of the people, their acquaintance with biblical manuscripts was limited. Erasmus, one of the greatest scholars of the day, based his first printed Greek New Testament on just a handful of manuscripts. Today, we have about 5,700 manuscripts to examine. The situation of the Old Testament is also very different from the 1500s, especially after the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls, beginning in 1947, which included 220 Old Testament manuscripts, the oldest available. The result has been that for the most part, modern translators translate different Greek and Hebrew texts from those used by Luther and others from that period.

So how do we make sense out of so much material in order to establish the original text—the one we want to translate? Over the centuries, scholars have created an entire science devoted to just such an enterprise, and not only for biblical materials. All works from antiquity for which there is more than one manuscript present the same sorts of problems. For any particular passage we have to look at the variations that occur in the manuscripts and decide which one is what the author wrote.

Textual critics, as they are called, have developed many criteria for making that decision. Some of these criteria deal with external factors, others with internal. The former consists of things like the number of manuscripts supporting a particular reading, the age of a manuscript and its quality (was it carefully copied in the first place?). The

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latter looks for the reading that best accounts for the other readings in view of mistakes that a copyist was likely to have made through haste, weariness, uncertainty and the like. Such principles are not always easy to apply and so there is always debate about some readings. However, for most readings there has also developed a great deal of consensus and confidence.

Unfortunately, that *may* now be changing on account of the computer. Textual critics can now process huge amounts of evidence and establish relationships between manuscripts and readings that were previously impossible. This will probably result in Hebrew and Greek texts that are somewhat different from the ones in common use today.

In view of all the challenges in determining the original text, to say nothing of translating it, the question arises, can we trust our Bibles? The answer is certainly yes. Our Lord Himself promised to preserve His Word

(Matt. 24:35), and He does not lie. In fact, 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.

So when you go to buy your next Bible and, of course, you want a good one, I suggest you talk to your pastor first. He may not help you much in choosing a cover color, but he can point you to a reliable translation. 🏠

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