

How We Got the Old Testament - Luke 24:44

William Tyndale was a Roman Catholic priest in 16th century England. He was a brilliant scholar who studied at Oxford and Cambridge and who spoke seven different languages as well as being proficient in both Hebrew and Greek. The desire of his life was to translate the Bible into the English language so that ordinary people could read the Word of God. It was against the law under England's King Henry VIII. From the crown to the church it was taught that ordinary people could never understand the Bible and that only priests and scholars were smart enough and good enough to read and interpret what the Bible has to say.

In order to translate the Bible into English Tyndale had to flee England. He went to the Continent and moved from one free city to the next, all of which were under Lutheran control. In 1525, while living in the German city of Worms, he completed the first translation of the New Testament from Greek to English. Copies were made and smuggled back into England. The authorities were enraged and plotted to capture and condemn William Tyndale. He was arrested and suffered imprisonment under terrible conditions. The trial was secret and lasted for months. In 1536 he was convicted, degraded from the priesthood and was sentenced to die.

William Tyndale was publicly bound to a wooden beam. Wood was placed at his feet and gunpowder was added to the wood to make it burn faster. An iron chain and a rope were put around his neck. The executioner tightened the noose and strangled him to death. He then set a torch to the wood and the gunpowder to burn Tyndale's body. As he was about to die, William Tyndale cried out, "Lord, open the eyes of the King of England."

Tyndale died so that we could read the Bible in English. He knew what millions learned before and since—that the Bible is the powerful, supernatural Word of God that transforms lives.

In our study of how we got our Bible we have learned that "bible" means book, but that the Bible is really a library of 66 books divided between the

Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament. It originated with God who revealed supernatural content and inspired the Bible's authors to guarantee accuracy. About 40 authors wrote the Bible over a period of 1000 years. These authors incorporated their own style and personalities into what they wrote. But that brings us to the specific question: How did we get the Old Testament?

The origins of the Bible began before the words of the Bible were written down. The Bible is the record of God's communication and relationship with people and that began with spoken words. God spoke to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. God told Moses how to help the Hebrew people escape from slavery in Egypt. God spoke and wrote the Ten Commandments and gave them to Moses on top of Mount Sinai. Communication was oral, memorized and repeated from one person to another.

Those spoken words were rooted in supernatural experiences with God. That's why they were so carefully remembered and repeated. Sometimes we assume that written records are always more accurate than verbal memories but that is not necessarily so. We are a literate society and therefore we depend on paper and ink. However, other cultures are often amazingly careful in preserving and passing along oral histories and information. Also, God was guiding the process to guarantee the accuracy.

We understand how this works because we do this in our culture as well. The President of the United States holds a press conference. An opening

statement is made, questions are asked, answers are given and a news story is later written. A history book may follow years later. That which started with spoken words ended up in print.

Increasingly spoken words were recorded. There are many examples. Let's consider some from the Old Testament book of Exodus. In Exodus 20 God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses. In Exodus 21-24 God gave to Moses a list of specific instructions about how

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the Hebrew people were to live in a covenant relationship with God—treatment of servants, how to cook food, criminal punishment, political boundaries and more. All of it was oral.

Moses wrote down what God said and called what he wrote “The Book of the Covenant”. He stood before the gathered nation to report what had happened. The people responded positively. Then Moses read the “Book of the Covenant” he had written to record God’s words. We find this in Exodus 24:3-7:

When Moses went and told the people all the LORD’S words and laws, they responded with one voice, “Everything the LORD has said we will do.” Moses then wrote down everything the LORD had said.

(Did you get that? Then he wrote it down. After they said they’d do it.)

He got up early the next morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain and set up twelve stone pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel. Then he sent young Israelite men, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as fellowship offerings to the LORD. Moses took half of the blood and put it in the bowls, and the other half he sprinkled on the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, “We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey.”

Here’s the point: God spoke; Moses wrote down what God said. It was short; it was called the *Book of the Covenant*. What Moses wrote was eventually included in the book of Exodus (chapters 21-23), one of the books among the 39 volumes in the Old Testament.

Over the years more and more books were written recording what God said and how God related to the people of Israel. What started out as spoken words became written words so that they would be properly preserved and could be passed on to future generations.

As more and more books were written they were put together into collections of books. God used scribes and editors to put together writings and make them into books. Sometimes the editors added extra explanations to make sense and fill out what earlier authors had written. Moses wrote most of the book of Deuteronomy and included his own story. However, the book of Deuteronomy

ends with these words:

And Moses the servant of the LORD died there in Moab, as the LORD had said. He buried him in Moab, in the valley opposite Beth Peor, but to this day no one knows where his grave is. Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were not weak nor his strength gone. The Israelites grieved for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days, until the time of weeping and mourning was over.

Moses didn’t write his own obituary—an editor added it.

A very obvious collection of books in the Old Testament is what we call the *Psalms*. Psalms are songs. They are the words to the music sung by the Hebrew people. Different songwriters wrote the psalms over many years. They were assembled into songbooks. Eventually there were five separate books of Hebrew songs. If you look at the opening page of the book of Psalms in the Bible you will see a heading before the first psalm. It says “BOOK I Psalms 1-41”. Next look at Psalms 41-72. In between it says “BOOK II Psalms 42-72”. The first two books of Psalms are composed of songs written by King David. At the end of the second book, in Psalm 72:20, it says, “*This concludes the prayers of David son of Jesse.*”

All altogether there are five separate books that were collected together to become the *Book of Psalms* in the Old Testament. They were written by many different musicians over hundreds of years.

The writing was on scrolls. Those scrolls were carefully preserved. Initially they were kept safe in the temple in Jerusalem. However, copies were regularly made. The scribes who copied the scrolls were extremely careful. They realized that they were working with the Word of God and didn’t want to make a mistake.

While they weren’t perfect they did a very good job. Through the years the scribes sometimes made mistakes. Sometimes they transposed numbers. Sometimes they misspelled names. Some scrolls got torn. Some were partially burned. A lot of them were lost or otherwise destroyed. But overall, scribes did an amazingly good job.

Remember, this was a divine/ human process. God allowed people to be their human selves but he also supervised the process to make sure his

message wasn't distorted or lost to future generations.

Over about 1500 years the Old Testament was written and acknowledged to be the holy Word of God. Some of the exact details of how this happened are not historically clear. After all, there were thousands of writings that were not included in the Old Testament. It was a process of selection.

The Hebrew people just seemed to know what was supposed to be in the Bible and what was not supposed to be in the Bible. We understand the process because we use some similar processes today.

I have received thousands of letters throughout my life. I save some and not others. Among the most important are letters written to me by Charleen before we were married. We grew up together; we've known each other all of our lives. We dated for five years before we were married and for two of those five years we lived a thousand miles apart so we wrote lots of letters. I kept all of her letters; she kept all of my letters because they are in a category all by themselves. How did I know to keep those letters and not the tuition bill from the university? I just knew! I recognized her handwriting. Even if a letter was typed I could tell she wrote it. Her letters are different. I love her. I know her. Her letters are keepers.

We do the same thing as a nation. We keep the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Gettysburg Address in special climate controlled rooms that are secure 24 hours every day. How do we know that these documents are more important than others written the same years? We just know. We all know. They are in a class all by themselves.

The Hebrew people just knew what was to be included in the Bible and what was not. They just knew what came from God

and what was ordinary literature. They knew what to include and what to exclude. Besides, God was guiding them in the process.

Specifically and historically, the Old Testament was formally acknowledged around 164 B.C. under the leadership of a famous Jewish leader named Judas Maccabeus. The Hebrew people organized the Old Testament into three sections called The

Law, The Prophets and The Writings.

After the Old Testament was finished and acknowledged there were some rabbis who expressed some doubts about a few books on the list. Two examples were the Song of Solomon and Esther because neither book directly refers to or mentions the name of God. But the Hebrew people were convinced that God wanted these books included in the Bible and overwhelmingly overruled the rabbis.

So, when the Old Testament was written and acknowledged it included the exact same 39 books we find listed in the Table of Contents of our Bibles today, although the order was slightly different.

Around the 3rd century B.C. the Old Testament was translated from Hebrew into Greek. The translation is called the "Septuagint". The translators included some other Hebrew books beyond the 39 we list for the Old Testament. All together there were 13. They were: I and II Maccabees; I and II Esdras; Tobit; Judith; Wisdom of Solomon; Ecclesiasticus; Baruch; Song of the Three Children; Susanna; Bel and the Dragon; Prayer of Manasses. Altogether, some of these books go by different names and the total can vary but together they are referred to as the "Apocrypha" (which means "hidden" or "secret" because they were said to hold spiritual secrets in them).

Ancient Jews and Christians valued and read these books. Some people wanted to add them to the Old Testament. Eventually a decision was made by the Roman Catholic Church to add them to the Catholic Bible at the Council of Trent (1546).

Protestants have never acknowledged the Apocrypha to be part of the Bible. There were many reasons but two primary reasons. First, the Jews never accepted the Apocrypha as part of the Old Testament. Also, Jesus never acknowl-

edged or mentioned them as part of the Bible. If Jesus and the Jews didn't include the Apocrypha it was decided that these books weren't part of the Bible.

Let me make a comparison. Today we have many so-called "Study Bibles" that include footnotes, marginal notes, introductions, outlines, explanations and other tools to help us understand

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the Bible. I am one of the contributing writers to the *Quest Study Bible* where I wrote explanations that have been included on the pages of the Old Testament.

Suppose that these explanations are considered to be very good and are read and re-read by Christians over hundreds of years. Some people might start to think that these additions are part of the Bible even though they are not.

I think that is what happened with the Apocrypha. The books were read and re-read until some Christian scholars (not Jewish scholars) decided they should be included in the Old Testament.

So, are the books of the Apocrypha bad? No, they are not. They are interesting religious literature that is pretty much compatible with the rest of the Bible; they're just not part of the Bible.

By the first century the Jewish community had a clear and defined Old Testament. Jesus knew the Old Testament very well. He quoted it often. He gave his endorsement to its content and authority. Luke 24:44 quotes Jesus as saying, *"This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."* So Jesus believed the Old Testament, he quoted it and he referred to it using the three divisions of the Jewish Bible. In addition, Jesus constantly quoted the Old Testament as a source of divine authority.

But there is something more to what Jesus said. He taught that the Old Testament was full of prophecies pointing to him. The Old Testament was a start not a finish. It began with sin but never fully explained salvation. It started with the Hebrew people but never included the rest of the people in the world. It predicted that a Messiah would come and bring salvation.

The Old Testament is a wonderful library with fabulous stories and some parts that are hard for modern Americans to understand—but we shouldn't miss the biggest point of the Old Testament and that is Jesus.

The famous radio commentator Paul Harvey tells fascinating stories that always lead to him talking about "the rest of the story". Anyone who reads the Old Testament hears the inspired revealed Word of God, but you must hear the rest of the story. The rest of the story is in the New Testament and it's all about Jesus—how God sent his Son from heaven to earth, how his Son lived a perfect life and then died on the cross to pay for all our human sin, how

God raised him back to life again. And, how all who believe in Jesus can have sin forgiven, heaven forever and the love and life of God transforming their lives starting now.

And now, let me challenge you to read the Bible. It's not just a book to learn about, it is the Word of God to learn from! People have given their lives so that we can have the Bible in English. If you're new at this, let me give you a few hints. Don't start with the Old Testament; start with the New Testament. And don't start with the first book of the New Testament, which is Matthew, because Matthew is one of the hardest books in the New Testament to understand. It's better if you start with Mark, one of the biographies of Jesus. Read it. Meet God. Discover Jesus Christ. This is God's Word to us.

Father, thank you for the Bible! Thank you for the truths that you give to us. But most of all we realize that this is a means to an end—and that end is to know you and to experience you. We pray this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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