

How We Got the New Testament

Many of our everyday English expressions come from the New Testament. So a person may talk about the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, going the second mile, being the salt of the earth, turning the other cheek or the blind leading the blind. The person on the street may know that no one can have two masters, that the Golden Rule says, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”, that “the love of money is the root of all evil” or that something is “a thorn in the flesh”. These and more expressions are used every day—sometimes by those who have never read the Bible, by those who would say they don’t believe in God or the Bible or by individuals who may not even realize that they are quoting from the New Testament.

The Bible is the book of God, but more specifically it is the book of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ was promised in the Old Testament and was delivered in the New Testament. That’s the story of John 3:16 that tells us, “*God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*”

How did those sayings come all the way from the words of the first century into print in the 21st century? In our series on how we got our Bible we have studied where the Bible came from and how we got the Old Testament. Now we will study how we got the New Testament.

Three elements formed the historical basis for the New Testament. First is the Old Testament, second are sayings and speeches and third are events.

By the first century the Old Testament was complete and was accepted as authoritative by the Jewish community. The Old Testament is frequently quoted in the New Testament. You could say that the New Testament is really a commentary on what the Old Testament is all about.

In terms of sayings and speeches Jesus preached sermons, others preached sermons, there were conversations and records of those conversations. In the first century a shortage of writing material prompted people to develop shorthand

so they could put large amounts of information in small amounts of space. Perhaps when Jesus preached there were people like Matthew—a customs agent by trade who would have known the shorthand—who took word-for-word records of what Jesus said. That then was incorporated into the New Testament.

The New Testament records numerous events—miracles; stories; history; everything from the birth of Jesus to his death, resurrection and ascension. It is interesting that apparently Jesus wrote no books, although we know that Jesus was literate.

Do you remember a story in the New Testament of a woman who was caught in the act of adultery? Her accusers stood around her, stones in hand, ready to kill her; but Jesus intervened. We’re told in John 8 that Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When the accusers saw what he wrote they all disappeared. That meant that Jesus was literate.

We know from history that there was a surprisingly high level of literacy in first century Israel. We also know that Jesus gathered followers around him who could read and write and therefore give a record of Christian history for future generations to read.

At first there was no need for a written record because there were thousands of people who heard what Jesus had to say, saw the miracles he performed

and who saw Jesus after his resurrection. It was very common information. Also, among those who became Christians there was wide-based expectation that Jesus was going to come back to earth again in their lifetime. Therefore there was no reason to write it down. Everybody knew all the information.

But then these Christians started to age, some of them started to die and Jesus still hadn’t returned. Realizing this they saw the need to provide a written record so that what Jesus said and did would not be lost and distorted for future generations.

Before long there were multiple biographies

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of Jesus, probably the first was authored by Mark. We're not sure if Mark was actually an eyewitness—strong indication is that he may have been. But Mark did what historians have always done—he used reliable sources for information. His primary source was Peter. Since Peter was so close to Jesus he was an excellent source. With Peter's help Mark wrote what is the shortest biography of Jesus in the New Testament. Mark's biography minimized Old Testament references.

Matthew apparently had Mark's biography in front of him when he wrote the second biography of Jesus. It is a longer book but it incorporates much of what Mark had to say, much of it word-for-word. He added in other reports, stories, details and loads of Old Testament references. While Mark wrote primarily to a non-Jewish audience Matthew wrote primarily to a Jewish audience.

A little later Luke came along. Luke was a physician by training and closest of all the New Testament writers to being a professional historian. His style reflects a strong Greek literary education. He was aware of the other biographies of Jesus but he wanted his to provide details, so his became the longest biography of Jesus. Because Luke wasn't an eyewitness he wrote as a researcher. He investigated all that happened, talked to a lot of people, kept notes and then wrote it down. He starts his biography of Jesus saying:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

Years later John, the last of Jesus' original disciples to still be alive, wrote a fourth biography of Jesus. His biography is quite different from the ones written by Mark, Matthew and Luke because he was very intentional about writing previously unrecorded information.

John was closer to Jesus than anyone else. He was Jesus' best friend and closest follower. He knew that he had more information than he could possibly include and so he wrote an interesting line in his biography in John 20:30-31:

Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Jesus' story ended with him ascending back to heaven. But the miracles continued. Just a little over a month after Jesus ascended to heaven people from around the world gathered in Jerusalem for the Festival of Pentecost. That day 3,000 people became Christians and miraculously spoke in foreign tongues they had never learned before. It was a sensational day.

But that wasn't the last of the miracles. People were healed of diseases, they were set free from prison, dead people came back to life again and the church was established. It began to grow and to spread across the empire. Jesus had gone up to heaven but the Holy Spirit had come down to earth and fabulous things were occurring.

God was still at work and there needed to be a record of it so Luke again picked up pen and parchment and continued to write history. What he wrote next we call the Acts of the Apostles. It told the events that happened in the lifetime of the followers of Jesus. He started out once again writing to Theophilus, saying:

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.

He then went on to write 28 chapters of what God was still doing and what God was doing was establishing churches all across the empire. Some were huge with thousands of people. In Jerusalem, Corinth, Philippi, Rome, in the province of Galatia and in the city of Thessalonica churches were popping up all over the place because Jesus' disciples had become itinerant missionaries.

While traveling they still had lessons to teach the Christians in these churches so they wrote letters back to each of the churches telling them what they needed to know. The Christians in the churches read those letters, they read Luke's history of what was happening, they read the biographies of Jesus and they read the Old Testament on a regular basis. Because the believers were hungry for the truths of God these letters were passed

around from church to church until they started to wear out. People then made copies of these letters so they could continue to be passed around until eventually there were thousands of copies available.

Along with the 27 books in our New Testament there were other writings that were produced at the same time. There were more than 20 other gospels besides Matthew, Mark, Luke and John including the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Nicodemus and the Arabic Gospel of the Infancy. One of the most popular of these was a book called *The Shepherd of Hermas*.

Hermas was a slave who had been set free and became a businessman in the city of Rome at the end of the first century and the beginning of the second century. He wrote a book in which he reported that the Shepherd, Jesus, had given him a series of visions that told him how he was supposed to live and gave instructions on how to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. He wrote down all of these visions in his book and it became a very popular second century discipleship manual for the early church.

If you read these writings you will find that the information is actually correct; they just didn't make it into the Bible. As the years past three tests were applied to determine whether or not these books should be recognized as part of the Bible. The first test was apostolic authority which asks if it was written by an apostle or someone close to or perhaps writing for an apostle, the second was whether the writing was Christ-honoring and consistent with other Christian writings and, third, was it accepted by the churches.

Through the years Christian leaders determined whether these books passed all three tests. They made lists. We still have a copy of that list today, written in the year AD 140. The final list was published by an African named Athanasius in the year AD 367 and included the 27 books that now comprise our New Testament.

Athanasius' enemies called him the black dwarf because of the color of his skin and his height. He was an amazing man. He was consecrated the bishop of Alexandria, Egypt, when he

was in his twenties even though the accepted rule of the day was that no one could be a bishop before the age of thirty. But he was brilliant and highly respected. When he was 77 years old, in the year 367, he wrote a letter that was sent to all of the churches of his diocese in which he listed the 27 books of the New Testament that are in our Bible today.

But understand, it was not bishops or scholars or churches that determined what should and shouldn't be in the New Testament. It was God who chose what should and shouldn't be included in his Word. What these others did was recognize and ratify the decision of God.

If you are called to appear for jury duty you will be asked with eleven other citizens to render a verdict of guilty or innocent. But everyone understands that you don't make that person guilty or innocent. That person makes himself innocent or guilty by what he has done. All the jury does is consider all the evidence and recognize and ratify what is understood to be true. In the same way those Christian leaders together recognized and ratified that which God had included in the New Testament.

During the past 2000 years the Bible has been translated into more than 2000 languages. At first it was a very slow process, only a half dozen or so languages in the first several hundred years and then only a few verses. In 1382 John Wycliffe translated the entire Bible into the English language. But the most famous translation of the

Bible into the English language was completed in 1611 by fifty scholars and became known as the King James Version of the Bible. It was named after King James who was then the monarch of England.

Between 1611 and 1950 there were a few other translations but none ever had the popularity or acceptance of the King James Version. The King James Version was well done and has left a massive imprint on the Christian world and the English language. In 1952 a new translation was made, the Revised Standard Version of the Bible. Between 1950 and now there have been a lot of other translations so that now you can go into a bookstore and have your pick.

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For some people this is confusing.

Why do we have so many translations in our lifetime? There are multiple reasons. One is that we have better manuscripts. When the King James Version was translated in 1611 the translators worked off Greek and Hebrew manuscripts from the 12th and 13th centuries. They were only a few hundred years old but that was the best they had to work with. Because of the scholarship and archeology in our generation we now have 5000 ancient manuscripts of the New Testament, some of them dating back to the year 100—almost the time when these documents were first written. So what we have today is a far better source from which to translate.

The other reason is the Bible's popularity. People love the Bible. They want the Bible to be accessible and they want it to be readable in everyday English. My suggestion is to check out several translations and pick the one that is most readable to you.

We have considered how we got our Bible. Now let's move on to how we understand it. The Bible's main message is that God loves us. God loves us so much that he sent his Son to die for us. He invites us to receive Jesus his Son as our Savior and Lord and promises to forgive us and give us eternal life.

In many ways the Bible is a gift certificate and the gift is eternal life. You know that if you have a gift certificate you don't get the benefit from it until you cash it in. And so it is with the gift certificate of eternal life; until we claim it and cash it in with God it is simply a piece of paper.

So, I invite you to receive the gift certificate of eternal life and say, "Yes, I cash it in. I believe in Jesus Christ. And I accept the eternal life that comes from him." If that is your decision, tell God—*now!*

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