

HOW WE GOT THE BIBLE

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When e-books became popular, we saw the greatest change in books since the invention of the printing press in the 15th century. What if e-books completely replace printed books? Think about how strange printed books and the whole process of producing them will seem then. If we could transport ourselves to the 25th century, we might have much to explain about the format and content of our reading materials, and our descendants would have much to imagine. That is how it is for us when we try to imagine books and their readers in ancient Israel.

We are separated from the writing of the final books of the NT by 1,900 years. This may seem like a long time, but consider the extensive period of time before the time of Christ—certainly hundreds of years, if not a thousand—during which the OT books were written. From the time of early Israel to the 1st century CE of Paul, John, and Peter, there were significant changes in language, writing, writing materials, and the making of texts.

Ancient Books and Writing

Books as we know them—with clearly established authorship and composed as single volumes, bound, and sold to individuals—were unknown in ancient Israel. Books were too expensive for all but a few to own, and there was no book business in the modern sense of that concept. Nor were there many competent readers.

Let's think about the origin of the OT. People often imagine a period when the material of the Bible—stories and prophecies, poetry and traditions—was handed down orally (around the campfire, so to speak), followed by a period when this material was put into writing and handed down in printed form. But it's more accurate to say that written texts circulated *alongside* spoken tradition and oral performance. Written texts supported the passing on of information and traditions by word of mouth in two ways. First, the texts aided the memories of the people who recited stories and traditions. Second, the texts were read aloud and, in time, included aids for readers, who read them to an audience. (Silent reading was rare and even regarded as strange.)

Relatively few people could read beyond the basic level required for everyday business. That left the reading of more serious texts, like the scriptures, to the experts. This was especially true in Babylon and Egypt, where complicated writing systems set a high bar for readers. Fortunately, the situation was much better in Palestine, where speakers of Hebrew or related languages enjoyed the benefit of a simple 22-letter alphabet. Scholars estimate that only about 5 to 7 percent of Babylonians and Egyptians could read and write; but in Palestine the figure would have been significantly higher, though how high isn't known.

In Babylon and some other places, clay tablets were used for writing. These were typically small enough to hold in one hand. People made wedge-shaped characters with a stylus (a pointed, pen-shaped instrument) in the soft clay surface, and the tablets were then hardened by baking or drying in the sun. It could take a scribe about 50 hours to copy the 3,000 lines of the great Babylonian poem *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

Evidence for everyday reading and writing in Palestine has come to us through random archeological discoveries. For instance, archeologists have found many notes and records on pieces of broken pottery called *ostraca*, a sort of ancient notepaper used for everyday notes and administrative purposes. These suggest that at least some of the common people were able to read and write simple texts.

More important documents in Palestine were written in ink on scrolls made of papyrus (a writing material made from thin strips of the papyrus plant; the plural is "papyri"), parchment (specially prepared animal skins), or leather. Unfortunately, the dampness of Palestinian winters has destroyed these fragile materials. Interesting bits of evidence of their existence remain, however. For instance, scrolls often had a clay seal attached to them, indicating their ownership (see Jer 36:1-10). Archeologists have found more than 1,000 of these seals in Palestine. A good number of them, dating as far back as the 7th century BCE, carry the phrase "belonging to the king" written in Hebrew. While this tends to confirm that many of these documents were for royal use, such seals have been found throughout Palestine. So it's probably safe to conclude that someone in each location could read the writing on the scrolls.

A scroll wasn't a book as we think of it, with bound pages, a cover, and a title advertising its contents. It was more like a rolled-up text-storage device. Later, in the Christian era, the book, or codex, came into use. Whereas, like our books today, the length of a text tended to determine the size of a codex, the

practical length of the scroll set the limit for its text. A typical scroll consisted of about 20 sheets of papyrus glued together, making it about 11 feet long. A longer scroll might have 40 or even 60 joined sheets; but at 60 sheets (30 or more feet), a scroll became very awkward to use.

Currently we think of texts as the works of individuals who present research or express their own creativity through writing. Most authors expect to have their written work protected by copyright law and to receive payment for their efforts. These ideas were foreign to people of the OT world. Important texts were typically the property of a ruler, a dynasty, a people, or a religious community. These people edited, preserved, and passed texts on from one generation to the next. For example, when we read the word “I” in a biblical psalm, we naturally assume it refers to its author. But OT psalms come to us from a long tradition of worship in Israel. Certainly, the psalm originated with *someone*, but its ancient Israelite audience understood the original writer’s “I” to refer to the community and represent common human experience before God.

Scribes were the key agents in composing, editing, updating, and preserving texts. More than secretaries, they were scholars trained in writing, reading, memorizing, and handling texts. Scribes were often employed by the royal palace or the temple. Some rose above the routine work to become highly educated scholars who, among other things, composed and collected proverbs and other wisdom literature.

The Writing of the OT

The history of the writing of the OT books is complex and mostly hidden from our eyes. Some of this history can be pieced together by paying careful attention to details. It helps to remember the four broad periods of Israelite and Jewish history:

- Earliest Israel (to the period before c. 1000 BCE)
- The Israelite kingdoms before the exile (1000–587 BCE)
- The period of the Babylonian exile (587–538 BCE)
- The post-exilic period (538–400 BCE)

The OT covers this entire span of time, but the actual writing of the OT texts was a process that grew with the establishment of the Israelite kingdoms and reached its climax in the exilic and post-exilic periods.

Some evidence of how the OT was written is relatively easy to find. For instance, some historical books mention such sources as “the official records of Israel’s and Judah’s kings” (2 Chron 35:27) and “the Jashar scroll” (Josh 10:12–13; 2 Sam 1:18). These books refer to legal sources like “the Instruction scroll from Moses” (2 Kgs 14:6; Neh 8:1). In the book of Proverbs we find mention of the “Proverbs of Solomon,” the “Sayings of the Wise,” the “Words of Agur,” and the “Words of King Lemuel.” The book of Psalms is a collection from various sources (psalms of Korah, of Asaph, of David). In other cases we find two accounts that are nearly identical, such as Isaiah 36–39 and 2 Kings 18:13–20:19. This suggests either that one text depends on the other or that they share a common source. We also have the parallel histories of 1 Samuel through 2 Kings, on the one hand, and 1–2 Chronicles on the other, with the Chronicles providing a later interpretation of the earlier history.

At one point, the book of Jeremiah pulls back a curtain on the writing process. Jeremiah dictates to his scribe, Baruch, a warning to Judah. This warning is then read publicly, but the king disapproves of the message and destroys the scroll. Jeremiah then dictates the message to Baruch again, adding “many similar words” to it (Jer 36:32). In this basic way, the book of Jeremiah shows how the texts developed in stages.

Some sources aren’t mentioned as clearly but may be detected from features of the biblical text. These features have led scholars to produce a variety of theories about how some texts were crafted. The most famous theories are those for explaining how we got the Pentateuch, the first five books of the OT. Although there’s no clear agreement on the details of how, when, and why the Pentateuch reached its present form, today very few scholars hold the traditional view that it was written by Moses. Instead, these books were written over a long period of time and draw on multiple sources. The Pentateuch itself speaks of some written sources (e.g., Gen 5:1; Exod 17:14; 24:4 34:27; Num 21:14–15; 33:2; Deut 31:9, 22, 24). No matter how these books were written, it seems clear that this great collection has an overall unity of purpose, even if it isn’t uniform in its texture and authorship. It’s more like a collage that reached its present form before the 6th century BCE.

The Pentateuch shares a storyline with the books of Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel, and 1–2 Kings. Sometimes called the Primary History, this work would have been widely available after 561 BCE, when the last king of Judah, Jehoiachin, was released from prison (2 Kgs 25:27). These books recount the entire stretch of history, from creation to the fall of David’s dynasty and the exile of many Judeans to Babylon. They tell

why Israel's judgment and exile occurred, and they offer cautious hope for a future descendant of David who would arise to bless the earth. It's likely that the fall of Jerusalem, the end of the Davidic kingship, and the unfolding exile led to the collection of the materials that make up this history of Israel.

When we think about the composition of the OT, we need to think in corporate terms. Some individuals were involved in these writings. In fact, some individual names were attached to books. This is especially true of the Prophets (e.g., Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Amos). However, we must think of the community of God's people as the means by which God speaks through scripture. Apart from the period of Israel's exile (after the Babylonians destroyed the temple in 587 BCE), it's helpful to think in terms of the temple as the center of scribal and priestly activity. Even the audience of these books would have been the community of God's people. The king was supposed to be familiar with the Instruction (Deut 17:18-19), as were the priests and the scribes, but it was the common people who heard it read aloud (Exod 24:7; Deut 31:11; Josh 8:32-35; 2 Kgs 23:1-3; Neh 8; Jer 36:8-10).

The shock of Babylonian exile—and the loss of temple, ruler, and city—led God's people to preserve texts and shape them into the books that make up our OT today. In the post-exilic period many of God's people and their leaders returned to the land of Israel. Alongside the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, there was a renewed emphasis on pulling together the nation's heritage of scriptures and letting them speak to the new situation in which Israel found itself (Neh 8).

The Emergence of the OT Canon

The texts of the OT shaped the life and worship of the Jewish people that emerged after the exile. These texts were recognized, honored, and received as having been given by God and speaking with God's authority. Many were edited to address the new situation of life after exile. This editing was a long process carried out by trained scribes. In fact, the final editorial work wasn't completed until just before the first Christian century. By the 1st century BCE, Jews in Roman Palestine had settled on a collection of scriptures made up of the same books found in the OT today.

The 1st-century Jews in Alexandria, Egypt, recognized a broader selection of books, including what we today call the OT Apocrypha. This collection comes down to us in what was certainly the greatest translation project of the ancient world—the translation of Israel's Hebrew scriptures into Greek, called the Septuagint (abbreviated as LXX). Because most early Christians spoke Greek, the Bible of early Christianity was this Greek OT. Today the Orthodox Church retains the Greek Bible as its authorized version of the OT and assumes the canonicity of the Apocrypha (1 Esdras, Tobit, Judith, 1–3 Maccabees, Wisdom, Ben Sira, Baruch, and the Letter of Jeremiah). The Western (or Roman) Church also includes the books of the Apocrypha (consisting of a slightly different collection), considering them to be deuterocanonical (i.e., the second canon).

Israel's Hebrew scriptures have the same 39 books we find in the Christian OT. However, they're grouped together in 24 books (e.g., without the “firsts” and “seconds” of Kings and Chronicles) and in an order that differs from that of the Christian OT. In the Hebrew scriptures we find three divisions: Torah (Instruction), Prophets, and Writings. Torah consists of the five “Books from Moses,” or the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). Prophets includes the Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel, and 1–2 Kings) and the Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the 12 Minor Prophets treated as one book, The Twelve). Writings is comprised of Psalms, Proverbs, Job, a grouping of five books known as The Scrolls (Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther), Daniel, Ezra–Nehemiah (as one book), and Chronicles.

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947 tore a small opening in the curtain of history to show us how similar the texts in Israel's Hebrew scriptures and the Christian OT are to the ancient texts. The remains of a library of a strict Jewish community were found stashed in caves. Texts on leather and papyrus scrolls had been preserved in the hot, dry climate along the Dead Sea. Representing a period running from about 250 BCE to 68 CE, this treasury included the community's own writings as well as many bits and pieces, and even whole texts, of every book in our present OT except for Esther. The biblical texts preserved among the Dead Sea Scrolls are remarkably close to the OT text that Judaism has preserved over the centuries, the Masoretic Text. Before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the earliest full copy of the Masoretic Text was the Leningrad Codex, which dates from around 1000 CE.

The Masoretic Text shows us what mainstream Judaism regarded as its authoritative scriptures from at least the 1st century BCE. Evidence leads us to think this text was carefully preserved in the Jerusalem temple by trained scribes. It was painstakingly edited by each successive generation and copied when a manuscript showed signs of wear and the need for replacing. Beginning in the 1st century CE, there

was a concerted effort to standardize the Hebrew language in the texts. After the Romans attacked and destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in 70 CE, such care with the text was even more important because Judaism had truly become a religion of The Book.

A succession of scribal schools devoted themselves to overseeing the preservation of the text of the OT. The most famous of these was the Masoretes, a school of scribes who were responsible for producing the Masoretic Text and carried the task forward from about 500 CE to 1000 CE. Even before the Masoretes, however, specific quality-control guidelines had been established among the scribal schools. These included the choice of writing materials, the spacing between characters, the length of lines, and the rule that no letter or word could be written from memory.

The Masoretes, in turn, made careful notes in the margins that accompanied the text whenever it was copied. They added vowels in order to preserve for later generations the proper reading of words in the text. They also standardized a system of verse divisions, first introduced in the early Common Era but whose practice varied, that separated the text into 23,100 verses. (Chapters were introduced later, probably in the 13th century by Hugh of St. Cher.) In order to ensure the text was copied accurately, the Masoretes counted verses, words, and letters, and they noted which word fell in the exact middle of the text being copied. This data always accompanied the copied texts so they could be checked and rechecked by later generations of scribes.

As Christians used the Septuagint more and more, Judaism rejected it (when the Jews needed a Greek translation, they made a new one from the Hebrew). By the late 4th century an authoritative Latin translation of the OT was also required. Jerome (c. 345–420), a Christian scholar, translated the OT from the Hebrew text into Latin. While he was critical of the Greek and Latin translations that preceded his, he showed confidence in the Hebrew text, which most likely represented the Masoretic Text. This confidence in the Masoretic Text has continued over the centuries, and it remains the basis for our modern translations of the OT.

The Writing of the NT

The writing and composition of the NT took place during a much shorter time period. Instead of the hundreds of years it took for the development of the OT, we're now speaking of 50 to 70 years, a human lifetime, for the writing of the NT. We also know more about how texts were composed during this period. The NT books were written in the common Greek of a single time period and show a greater uniformity in the language and writing materials used to create them. Unlike the OT, for which our witnesses to the text come from a period much later than its original composition, we enjoy an abundance of NT texts (papyri) that have been preserved, even if mostly in fragments, from as early as the 2nd century CE.

The earliest NT books to be written were Paul's letters, which date from the late 40s to the early 60s. Paul used a secretary, as was the custom in his day for any lengthy work. Writing with pen and ink on papyrus was not as simple as we might imagine, and a secretary was someone who had been trained and was practiced in this skill. Paul's secretary would have first taken down dictation, possibly in a form of shorthand, on a notepad consisting of wooden tablets with recessed surfaces covered with wax. Dictating a letter, particularly a long one, probably involved several daily sessions. From this first copy his secretary would produce a good copy on papyrus, which Paul could review and correct. Then Paul would add his final greetings in his own hand (Gal 6:11; 1 Cor 16:21; Col 4:18; 2 Thess 3:17). When composing his letters Paul might have invited input from his team members, like Timothy, Sosthenes, and Silvanus (1 Cor 1:1; 2 Cor 1:1; Phil 1:1; Col 1:1; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1). He also included in his letters hymns, creeds, sayings of Jesus, and other material used in church worship and teaching.

Paul would keep a copy of the letter, while a good copy would be carried to the addressee, whether that might be a church (such as Philippi or Corinth) or a person (such as Philemon, Timothy, or Titus). The letter carrier would have been a trusted person (such as Tychicus, Eph 6:21; Col 4:7-9), who would know not only *what* the letter said but *why*, and could also help explain it as needed. Once the letter was received and read aloud, copies would have been made for further distribution to Christian communities in the area (Col 4:16; cf. Gal 1:2). And so would begin a broadcast of copies, and copies of copies, resulting in some of the texts that have been discovered over recent centuries.

How the four Gospels were composed is more difficult to determine. Luke comments on the process at the beginning of his Gospel: "Many people have already applied themselves to the task of compiling an account of the events . . . They used what the original eyewitnesses and servants of the word handed down to us." Having "investigated everything carefully from the beginning," Luke says he has "decided to write a carefully ordered account" (Luke 1:1-3). Clearly Luke recognizes he's standing on

the shoulders of others, and, with sources and traditions of Jesus to work with, he's gone about his task with deliberate care.

Luke's testimony fits well with the fact that three of our Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—have much in common with each other. And it's clear the origins of these “synoptic” Gospels (so called because they have a “similar view”) are connected in some way. John's Gospel is most different from the other three, with longer speeches by Jesus and different stories and themes. Yet John has important points of similarity with the synoptic Gospels.

We must recall that Jesus himself left no written record of his life or teaching. After his resurrection his disciples deliberately began to recall his words and deeds and share them orally, and probably in writing as well. Within early Christian communities the memories of Jesus' words and deeds would have been subject to the informal quality control of eyewitnesses and other reliable sources. From the Gospels themselves we can detect units of tradition—such as parables, miracle stories, and stories—that lead up to an important saying of Jesus. The extended story of Jesus' death, called the passion narrative, seems to have been a much larger unit of tradition. Before the first full gospel was written, there may have been several partial and varied collections of Jesus' sayings.

The Gospel writers took this material and constructed narratives of Jesus that came to be called gospels. (The term “gospel” wasn't used as a name for these texts until the 2nd century.) When they were written, they most resembled Roman biographies. The main reason for writing the gospels was to give believers a particular historical and theological perspective on the person and teaching of Jesus. No doubt there was also some concern that eyewitnesses were dying off. So these gospels were written for instruction and proclamation within the life of the church.

The Emergence of the NT Canon

Did the NT authors think they were writing scripture? We can't know for certain, but it's interesting to note how the four Gospel writers anchored their narratives in Israel's scriptural story and extended the story forward. For example, Matthew's Gospel starts with a genealogy of Jesus reaching back to Abraham. In his birth narrative Luke uses hymns that have an OT ring to them, and he provides a genealogy going back to Adam. Mark begins by echoing the words of OT prophets (Isa 40; Mal 3:1), and John opens with language and themes that recall Genesis 1. In his letters Paul speaks with a self-conscious apostolic authority, sometimes even like a prophet, and includes numerous appeals to the OT and its fulfillment. At the very least, NT writers understood that Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection were the climax of God's covenant relationship with Israel. This was worthy of a written memorial in the scriptural tradition, which included story as well as instruction.

More pointedly, 2 Peter 3:15-16 speaks of Paul's letters collectively as “scripture.” Then there is the curious case of 1 Timothy 5:18, which says: “The scripture says, *Don't put a muzzle on an ox while it treads grain, and Workers deserve their pay.*” The first part of the quotation is from Deuteronomy 25:4, which is clearly scripture. But the second, stated with equal authority, is a saying of Jesus from Luke 10:7. Depending on how we date the writing of 2 Peter and 1 Timothy, we may have evidence that a portion of the NT was regarded as scripture by some Christians as early as the late 1st century.

Some people think the authoritative collection, or canon, of NT books didn't attain scriptural status throughout the church until the 4th century. They also imagine this was the result of the political triumph of right belief (orthodoxy) over beliefs judged to be erroneous (heresy). Some think that in the 2nd century those gospels that were later regarded as noncanonical were nearly as common as the four Gospels we read in our NT. But there's interesting evidence this view is wrong, and that evidence comes from a town dump.

Some of our earliest fragments of gospel papyri come from the dump for the ancient town of Oxyrhynchus in Egypt. This area has produced thousands of fragments of all sorts of ancient literature. Of the fragments identified as being from any kind of gospel text dated to 200 CE or earlier, it's estimated that canonical Gospels outnumber noncanonical ones by about three to one. This is, of course, a random sampling of a purely incidental nature. Nevertheless, those who favor the so-called Lost Gospels rightly point out that Egypt was a hotbed of early Gnosticism (an ancient Christian heresy), one of the so-called Lost Christianities. But if that is so, why does the evidence from Oxyrhynchus show a preference for our canonical Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John?

The evidence from Oxyrhynchus becomes more interesting when we realize Christians were early adopters of a new technology: the codex, or book (rather than a scroll). There were probably several reasons for this preference, including the fact that the codex allowed quicker access to passages, had greater holding

capacity, could be carried around more easily, and was cheaper. But some have suggested the codex was also adopted because it could hold the four Gospels in one “book.” One thing seems certain: while Jews and other religious groups used the scroll for their religious texts, Christians overwhelmingly preferred the codex for their scriptural texts. (Christians favored scrolls for texts other than scripture.) The result was that the codex distinguished these texts, perhaps the Gospels first, as Christian scriptural texts.

Now, when the evidence of gospel texts from the town dump of Oxyrhynchus is categorized by whether they come from a codex or scroll, the evidence tilts even more radically toward our canonical Gospels being regarded as scripture (codex)—by a ratio of seven canonical Gospels to one non-canonical gospel. It is clear then that at this one significant location, the evidence shows that the non-canonical gospels were not as popular as the canonical Gospels. And this fits with other persuasive evidence that the Gnostic gospels represented an elitist and sectarian movement that did not win the hearts and minds of common people.

All in all, it seems the church’s wide acceptance of the NT canon was not the result of the trickling down of pronouncements from the seats of power. Rather, the NT we know today took shape as it bubbled up from the broad-based spiritual wisdom, insight, and devotion of the church. The books selected to be in the NT impressed themselves on the church and so were received as scripture and then accepted as canonical. Because they carried Jesus’ authority, the imprint of apostolic tradition, and the ring of truth and had proven their worth in the church, they were recognized as inspired scripture.

In the late 2nd century the church father Irenaeus could speak confidently of a “fourfold gospel.” The earliest discussion of the NT books received as canon by the universal church is the Muratorian Fragment, which is also often dated to the late 2nd century. As the name suggests, it has been only partially preserved for us. After a damaged beginning it mentions the third and fourth Gospels, Luke and John (likely having already named Matthew and Mark as the first and second Gospels). The fragment goes on to cover Acts, Paul’s letters, the letter of Jude, two letters of John, and Revelation. In all, 21 of our 27 books are listed; some others are given marginal status, while Gnostic and other heretical works are condemned.

In 367 the bishop Athanasius, in his Easter letter to the church, devoted much space to naming the books of the NT. This is the first time we know of someone plainly listing exactly the 27 books that make up our NT today. But it’s also clear Athanasius was not stating a new decision but simply sketching in what was already the established understanding by his day.

The order of the NT books has varied over the centuries. The Gospels typically came first, sometimes followed by Acts. The letters of Paul were grouped together and usually included Hebrews, because it was widely thought to have been authored by Paul. The catholic letters (James, 1–2 Peter, Jude, 1–3 John) were usually grouped together but may have been placed before or after Paul’s letters. Revelation most often came at the end but occasionally followed the Gospels, since it’s a revelation of Jesus Christ. In the NT we use today, Paul’s letters are ordered from the longest to the shortest letter to a church (Galatians, which precedes Ephesians, is slightly shorter than Ephesians, though in certain copies Galatians may have looked longer), then runs from the longest to the shortest letter to an individual. The present ordering of the NT books wasn’t really fixed until the printed English translations of the 16th century.

Establishing the Text of Scripture

Clearly the Bible we open and read today has a long history. Among the main Christian traditions, the contents of its canon range beyond the core of the 66 books found in Protestant churches. Except for those used by the Eastern Orthodox Church, translations rely on the Hebrew Masoretic Text for the OT and the Greek text of the NT. The Eastern Orthodox Church depends on the Septuagint for its OT. But no single text, Hebrew or Greek, is fully, 100 percent, the original text. This is because errors have crept in over centuries of copying the text by hand. In fact, the age of the printing press introduced its own errors and broadcast them more rapidly and broadly than the slow process of hand copying. And whereas Israel’s scriptures in Hebrew were for centuries copied in the most careful fashion, the Greek texts of the NT were handed down with less discipline, particularly during the earliest centuries.

From early times right up to the present, then, we have needed to study the manuscripts carefully in order to root out errors and find the most reliable text of the Bible. Early Christian scholars, such as Origen (185–254) and Jerome (345–420), carefully weighed the various readings of the texts they encountered. However, the modern science of what is called textual criticism (the discipline of judging which “reading,” or text, is authentic) got its start with Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466–1536), who published a Greek text of the NT based on the best manuscripts available to him.

Since the time of Erasmus, textual criticism has grown into a specialized field of study. Simultaneously, the number of available NT manuscripts, from fragments to whole texts, has increased significantly. The

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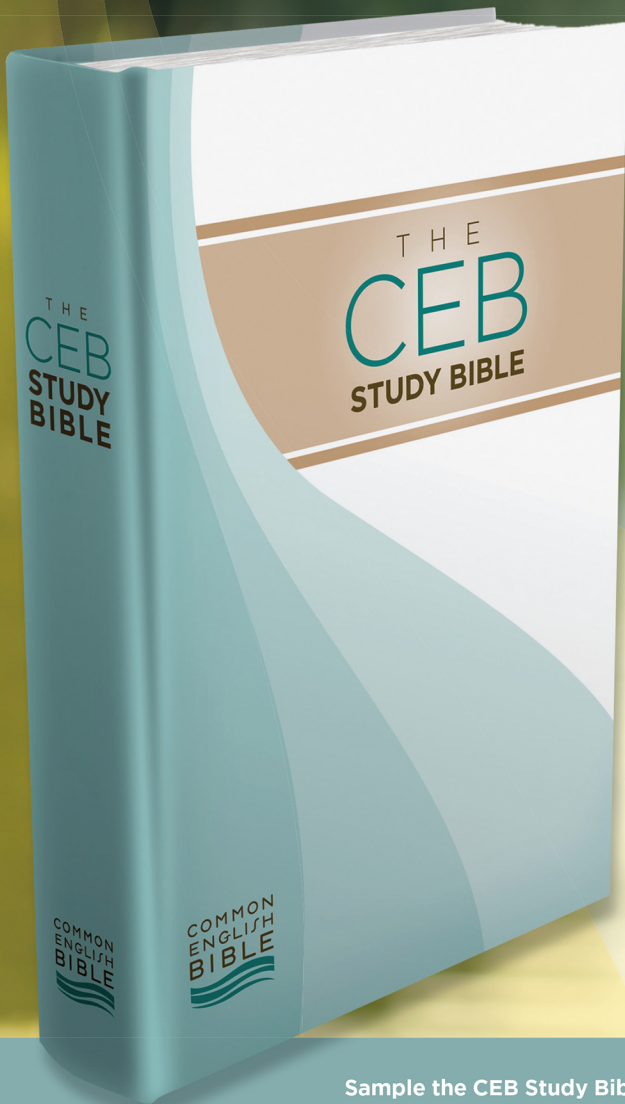
number of papyri now stands at 125, with the earliest dated to the 2nd century CE and numerous others from the 3rd and 4th centuries CE. In addition there are ancient translations of the Greek text and other types of early Christian literature that quote the NT. The result is that the text of the NT is far better supported than any other ancient literature of the period. Moreover, the work of text critics inspires a great deal of confidence that the text used in Bible translations today is extremely close to the original text. We can see some of this work in contemporary English translations. For example, the CEB points out in a footnote for John 8:11 that “Critical editions of the Greek NT do not contain 7:53–8:11” (see also the CEB footnote for Acts 8:36).

Following in ancient footsteps, modern editions of the Bible have continued to offer readers help. Chapter and verse divisions have been inserted, poetry is arranged in verse structure, headings and subheadings mark topics, footnotes explain obscure references or important alternate textual readings, cross-references point to relevant biblical texts, and extensive notes and essays accompany study Bibles. These features all support the reading and use of the Bible. But while they’re rooted in the best of scholarship, they shouldn’t be confused with the Bible itself. They are like a framework around an ancient but living text.

The Bible was not lowered from heaven on a golden strand. It has come down to us through the course of history, accumulating layers of wisdom, spiritual insight, and surprising events orchestrated by its divine author. In its writing and its preservation the Bible is true to its message, which speaks of a God who took up residence in the midst of Israel, a nomadic tribal people, and who finally comes to us as a young Jewish man from Nazareth, in the hill country of Galilee.

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