

The B-I-B-L-E Sermon Series
How We Got the Bible
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My friend Michael called me a few weeks ago. He knows I'm a Reds fan and he's a Toronto Blue Jays fan. He said, "You know the Reds and Blue Jays are playing the last weekend of the season." I said, "I know, but it's in Toronto." And he said, "So?" I checked my calendar and realized I could squeeze in a quick trip to Toronto to watch a game. Road trip!

A week ago Thursday, we loaded the car with enough snacks to feed a middle school youth group and hit the road. When we stopped for gas in Dayton, I said, "Man, I can't believe we're going to another country!" He said, "Me either!" then paused and said, "I forgot my passport!" I laughed. He didn't. So, we turned around, made a few calls, and an angel sent from heaven met us in Dry Ridge, just south of Cincinnati, with Michael's passport. There was the trip we planned, and then there was the trip that happened.

You know those kind of trips, right? Your flight is delayed, your luggage gets lost, you got 500 miles down the road before wondering, "Did I lock the front door?" The Bible's journey has also been filled with the same kinds of false starts and U-turns, and, unlike my trip with Michael, a few murders thrown in for entertainment. As we continue our sermon series on the Bible, we're going to look at how we got the book we now hold in our hands.

There's a lot we don't know about who wrote the Bible, but there's one person we can rule out right off the top: God. God didn't write the Bible. That doesn't mean God didn't have anything to do with it; in fact, God had a LOT to do with it. But God didn't write it. The Bible was written by about 40 or so faithful, dedicated, imperfect human beings, working under God's inspiration. The Bible is a divine-human collaboration, which means it bears the holy handprints of the God who inspired it and the flawed fingerprints of the people who wrote it.

There's something else we know about the Bible that is important to state right up front. Before the Bible was ever written, it was told, passed down orally for generations. Moses wasn't carrying a waterproof notepad through the Red Sea and Luke wasn't recording voice memos of Jesus' teachings. Writing instruments and paper weren't easy to find, and most people were illiterate anyway, so the stories of the Bible were simply memorized and recited for hundreds of years before someone wrote them down. So, we don't really know who wrote many of the 66 books of the Bible.

Some of the authors seem easy to spot because their books are named after them: The Gospel of Mark, the books of Isaiah and Jeremiah. Oh, if only it were that easy! If I were to write a book today and put my name on it, I would be guaranteed to sell tens of copies (if I begged people to buy it). But if I were to write it and put John Grisham's name on it, I would definitely sell a lot more books and probably get a "cease and desist" letter from Mr. Grisham. Back in ancient times, it was common to attach a famous person's name to a writing as a way of granting it authority. Did Matthew write Matthew? Maybe. Did Paul write his own letters? Probably some of them, but definitely not all of them. When it comes to identifying biblical authors, it's more of a guessing game than a certainty.

One way or another, these stories did get written down and began to be circulated among the fledgling churches in the first century. By this time, the writings of the First Testament were pretty well solidified into a canon, which means an accepted group of authoritative books. The First Testament canon developed in stages, starting with the Torah, the first five books of the

Bible, then the prophets, and finally the wisdom writings. It's interesting to note the Jewish version of the First Testament only has 24 books in it because it combines a lot of the ones we have separated.

The New Testament had a more tumultuous journey to canonization. By about the year 100, all the books and letters had been written. But those weren't the only spiritual writings that were in the Religion section of the local scroll store. Notice what Luke says at the beginning of his gospel: "Many have undertaken to set down an orderly account" of the events that had been handed down by eyewitnesses. These stories were being passed on orally and then written down by a number of people. We know today of many writings that didn't make it into the Bible, like the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Mary Magdalene.

So, who decided what was in and what was out? That's a little hard to say because there's not a moment in time we can pinpoint as the moment the canon was decided. We do know the first mention of all 27 books together was in the year 367 by a bishop named Athanasius, and confirmed 30 years later at the Council of Carthage. But that's only part of the story of how we got the Bible.

The Bible had been written, collected, and recognized as scripture. But there was still another problem: most people couldn't read it. And even if they could, they couldn't read the languages it was written in. While the Old Testament was written in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek with a little Aramaic thrown in, by the year 400 people weren't speaking any of those languages. They were speaking Latin. So, a monk named Jerome translated the Bible into Latin. His version, called the Vulgate, was initially condemned, because everyone knows the Bible is supposed to be written and read in the original Greek, right? But eventually the Vulgate caught on and became the official Bible of the church for about 1000 years.

Because Kinko's hadn't opened yet, the only way to get copies of the Bible were by hand. Monks known as Masoretes dedicated their whole lives to making hand copies of the Bible. They had a meticulous system of letter-counting and proofreading to make sure no errors were made, and if an editor found even one mistake, the whole Bible would be burned and the monk would have to start over. Still, I can't help but think a sleepy monk may have slipped up on a sentence, like changing the word "celebrate" to "celibate" and altering the happiness of monks for centuries after. Thousands of monks copying thousands of pages for hundreds of years. You see the human fingerprints that are all over this sacred book?

Fast-forward to around the 1300s. The church was still using the Vulgate, but the common language of the people in Britain was becoming Middle English, most notable used in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. People were wanting the Bible in their everyday language, but the church was resistant to letting people read scripture on their own. You never know what might happen if people were allowed to think for themselves! So, the church insisted that the holiness of the Vulgate shouldn't be tampered with.

Well, a guy named John Wycliffe tampered. In 1382, he translated the entire Bible into English from Latin. Wycliffe was a critic of the church and believed people should be allowed to read the Bible on his own. The church disagreed and made it illegal to translate the Bible into English, and 43 years after Wycliffe's death, they dug up his body, burned it, and threw the ashes in a nearby river. You know, in case he didn't get the message. Everybody knows the real Bible was written in Latin. Or was it Greek? Or Hebrew?

Wycliffe's efforts started a subversive movement to get the Bible into the hands of the common folks. The biggest aid in this effort was the invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg. Using the press, in 1521 Martin Luther translated the Bible into German, and at the

same time William Tyndale translated it again into English. Because this was illegal, Tyndale fled England for Germany, continuing to publish his English Bible and sneaking them back into England in sacks of flour. Tyndale was eventually arrested, strangled, and burned at the stake, which seems to be the accepted way of taking care of illegal Bible translators.

Finally, the folks in power realized the benefit of having an English Bible, so in 1611, King James I commissioned a group of 54 scholars to create an English Bible from the original Hebrew and Greek texts. The King James Version became the official Bible of the church for about 300 years, a poetic masterpiece that is still used today by many churches. But you probably already know the challenge of the King James Version. Unless thou dost worketh at a renaissance faire, no one talks like that anymore. In the last century, people realized that the use of “thees” and “thys” had greatly diminished in society, so new translations have been made, like the Good News Bible and the Message, that put the words of scripture into more conversational English. That fact has enraged biblical purists, who insist the only true Bible is written in the King James English. Or is it Latin? Or Greek? Or Hebrew?

Today, we have versions ranging from faithful translations to loose paraphrases. But even the strictest translation is really just an educated guess. The Hebrew alphabet has 22 letters, is read from left to right, and originally had no vowels or punctuation. It’s like putting together a 500-piece puzzle with 378 pieces and no picture on the box. Greek isn’t much easier. For example, the Greek language has several words that mean “love”: eros, philo, storge, agape. So when we read the word “love” in the New Testament, which one was the author meaning? That’s why we can take the Bible seriously, but not literally. Unless you are proficient in ancient Hebrew and Greek, you’re relying a whole host of people – authors, editors, copiers, translators – whose human fingerprints are all over the Bible.

The Bible has been passed down orally and then by scrolls, quilted together by editors, hand-copied by faithful and celibate monks, and translated by courageous folks who gave their lives for us to have the Bible today. It’s been translated into over 2200 languages and is the best-selling book in history. That’s how we got it, but there’s still work to do. Author Bruce Metzger writes, “There always remains the duty of all believers to translate the teaching of the Bible into their personal lives.” So, we are called to take our place alongside Paul and Jerome and the Masoretes and Wycliffe and Tyndale. The story of the Bible isn’t finished. Because the next chapter isn’t about translating Hebrew or copying Greek or printing English. The next chapter is about what we do with it. We’ll start that hard work together in a few week as we look at the different understandings of God in the Bible. But for now, let’s appreciate all inspiration of our Creator God and all the hard work and sacrifice of human beings that allow us the freedom and privilege of holding this book in our hands today. Knowing what it has gone through, we owe it to all those people, to our God, and to ourselves not to let someone else tell us what it says, but to read it for ourselves...and then to live it out.