

understanding
the Bible's teaching

The Bible - a book for today

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This booklet looks at the Bible as a collection of books. It considers where the Bible came from, how it came to us in its present form, its authority and message for us today. The booklet is divided into the following sections:

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The Bible – a book for today



INTRODUCTION

The Bible is still the world's best seller in English, but sadly it seems to be less and less read, so...

Find your Bible and look at it – as if you had not seen it before. On the spine there are probably the words '**HOLY BIBLE**'. Both are words which we use almost without thinking about their meaning. The word '**Bible**' is related to the Greek word 'biblios' and we find the first part of the word in our word 'bibliography' which means a book list – usually a list of books related to a particular subject. The word 'Bible' means 'books, collection of books, library'.

The word '**Holy**' means 'consecrated, sacred; morally and spiritually perfect; belonging to, commissioned by or devoted to God' (Concise Oxford Dictionary). This word is also used (because of its derivation) to mean 'special' or 'set apart for a special purpose'. The title of the book we are looking at really means that it is a special library or a collection of books – commissioned by God, set apart for a particular purpose. One of the aims of this publication is to demonstrate why the Bible is special and what makes it special.

Open the Bible and look at the index at the front. You will see the titles of all the separate books which make up the whole library. They are divided into two groups: 39 in the first part called the **Old Testament** and 27 in the second part called the **New Testament**. The books of the Old Testament were all written before the time of Christ and the New Testament books after the time of Christ in the first century AD. Practically all of the Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew and most of the New Testament was written in Greek. So

the whole of the Bible had to be translated so that we can read it in English, French, Spanish, Russian, Chinese, Hindi or in whatever language we speak.

If we now turn the pages of the Bible we will find the books are of different length and many of them have strange names – Genesis, Deuteronomy, Habakkuk and Malachi for example in the Old Testament – Colossians, Thessalonians and Philemon in the New Testament.

Genesis means ‘the beginning’ and the opening words of the book are ‘In the beginning...’ **Exodus** is linked to our word ‘exit’ and means the ‘way out’. The book tells about the way in which the Hebrew people were brought out of Egypt and what happened to them afterwards. Other titles of books are the names of teachers, leaders or others who wrote them. **Malachi** and **Habakkuk** are the names of prophets (teachers) as are **Isaiah**, **Jeremiah** and **Ezekiel**. You can usually tell why the book is so called by looking at its opening verses.

In the New Testament the names of the first four books are the names of the writers who recorded the four accounts of the life, work and teaching of Jesus – **Matthew**, **Mark**, **Luke** and **John**. Some of the other books are letters named after the writers – like **Peter** or **James**. Others are named after the groups of Christians to whom they were written. For example, **Colossians** is a letter written to Christians at Colosse by the Apostle Paul. **Philippians** is the name of the letter by the same writer to Christians at Philippi.

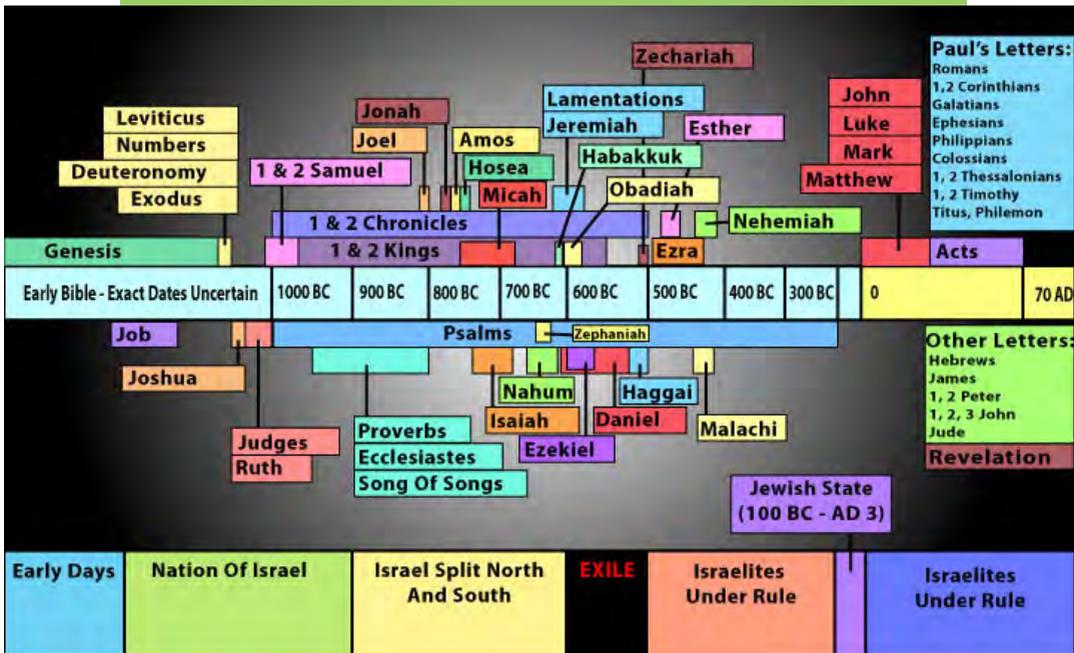
The **Book of Revelation** is different. It is an account of the visions that were given to the Apostle John at the end of his life when he was in exile on the island of Patmos. It begins: *‘The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants – things which must shortly take place. And he sent and signified it by his angel to his*

servant John, who bore witness to the word of God, and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, and to all things that he saw' (Revelation 1.1,2).

Already something special

If we study the various books of the Bible carefully we find that about 40 different people were involved as writers. They wrote while living in different countries – Mesopotamia (now Iraq), Greece, Egypt, Italy and of course, Israel. The books were also written over a long period of time – about 1,500 years (see Bible Timeline below).

BIBLE TIMELINE



The Bible then, in a very real sense, is not just one book, but a library of books. The fact that we have all these separate writings bound together in one volume makes it different and rather special.

For ease of reference the books of the Bible can be grouped as follows:

Old Testament (OT)

The Law: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. These first five books are sometimes called 'The Pentateuch', a word which means the 'five' books. They are also called 'The Books of Moses' and in the Hebrew Scriptures they are called 'The Torah'.

Historical Books: Joshua, Judges, Ruth, the First and Second Books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles, together with Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther. These books describe the history of Israel from the death of Moses to the establishment of a kingdom under Saul, David and Solomon; then its division into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Both kingdoms were eventually conquered and the people taken into exile to Assyria and Babylon. Only the southern kingdom was allowed to return from exile. The return is described in the books called by the names of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Poetic Books: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and The Song of Solomon. There are 150 Psalms which are divided into five sections or 'mini books'.

The Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. The opening verses of these books will usually say when the prophets preached their message.

New Testament (NT)

The Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The Gospel writers tell us about the birth of Jesus, his ministry and teaching, his crucifixion and resurrection.

History: The Acts of the Apostles. This book describes the spread of Christianity in the first century AD including the missionary journeys of the Apostle Paul.

Letters to groups of people: Romans, First and Second Letters to the Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians. These were written by Paul to the newly formed first century churches.

Letters to individuals: To Timothy (two letters), Titus and Philemon.

Hebrews: Written to the Jewish Christians particularly.

Other letters: James, First and Second Letters of Peter, First, Second and Third Letters of John and the letter of Jude. The writers' names form the titles of these books.

Revelation: Prophetic visions seen by the Apostle John during his exile on the Island of Patmos.

The claim of the Bible

If we look at the books of the Old and New Testaments we find many verses where the writers claim to be writing the words of God. Here are some examples from the book of Jeremiah:

'The words of Jeremiah the son of Hilkiyah, of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, to whom **the word of the LORD** came in the days of Josiah...' (Jeremiah 1.1, 2).

'Hear the word which the LORD speaks to you, O house of Israel. **Thus says the LORD:** "Do not learn the way of the Gentiles ..."' (Jeremiah 10 1, 2).

Look at any of the books of the prophets and there are many examples of the same claim.

These claims are confirmed in the New Testament

When Jesus was preaching, he often backed up his argument by appealing to the authority of the Jewish Scriptures, our Old Testament. *'Have you never read...'* he said on many occasions. And again: *'Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition? For God commanded, saying, "Honour your father and your mother"'* (Matthew 15. 3, 4). Jesus is quoting here from the book of Exodus (one of the books of Moses) which, he says, is the Word of God. He quotes from the Psalms and the Prophets in the same way.

When talking to his disciples after the resurrection, he explained to them that what had happened to him – his arrest, his suffering, crucifixion, death and resurrection – were all part of the Divine plan. *'And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself'* (Luke 24. 27 NIV). The Old Testament books claim to be the Word of God and Jesus referred to them and quoted them as God's Word.

The testimony of the Apostle Paul

Paul reminded the young man Timothy that right from being a child he had been brought up to know the Jewish Scriptures. They would tell him about:

- ❖ **Doctrine:** the word means 'teaching', so this meant that the Scriptures would tell him what he should believe;
- ❖ **Reproof:** they would tell him when he was choosing the wrong path;
- ❖ **Correction:** he could learn how to put himself right again;

❖ **Instruction in righteousness:** the Scriptures would tell him how to live his life in a way that would please God.

Paul said to Timothy that the reason the Scriptures are able to do this is because they are inspired by God:

‘and that from childhood you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by **inspiration of God**, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work’.

(2 Timothy 3.15-17)

What does inspiration mean?

The word ‘inspiration’ means that God breathed His message into the writers and they wrote His words, as Peter tells us:

‘...no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were **carried along** by the Holy Spirit’ (2 Peter 1. 20, 21 NIV).

The phrase ‘*carried along*’ is very strong in the original Greek from which our New Testament is translated. The Greek means ‘*carried irresistibly along*’. The writers **had** to write what they were inspired to write. The prophet Jeremiah again, is a good example of this. Because of his unpopular message, he was arrested, put in the stocks and on one occasion imprisoned in a water cistern. The result of this was that he made up his mind that if this is how I am going to be treated: if this is what will happen as a result of my preaching – then I will stop. I will not speak any more in God’s name. Instead, he says:

‘...if I say, “I will not mention him or speak any more in his name,” his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot’ (Jeremiah 20. 9 NIV).

Jeremiah was unable to stop himself speaking the message he was inspired to speak. That is what Peter meant by, ‘*Holy men of God spake as they were moved*’ (AV), ‘*carried along*’ (NIV), ‘*impelled by the Holy Spirit*’ (NEB).

The New Testament

The verses and the claims we have looked at apply to the Old Testament and we have concentrated on this part of the Bible because many Christians accept the New Testament as originating from God but will question the inspiration of the Old Testament. The Bible itself does not distinguish between the Old and New Testaments in this way.

Peter says that although Paul wrote many things that are hard to understand, his writings have the same authority as the Old Testament Scriptures. In Peter’s second letter, he referred to Paul’s teaching about salvation and the suffering and patience of Christ. He says that Paul wrote with God-given wisdom:

‘He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures...’

(2 Peter 3.16 NIV)

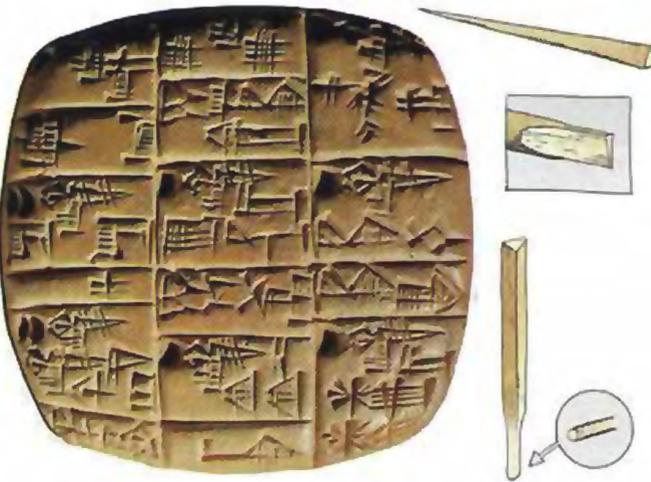
Peter speaks of Paul’s writing as having the same authority as ‘*the other Scriptures*’. In other words, they are Scriptures also. Paul himself wrote to the Christians at Thessalonica:

‘...we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.’

(1Thessalonians 2. 13 NIV)

HOW THE BIBLE WAS WRITTEN

At one time critics would say that the Bible could not have been written when it claims to have been, because writing was not known so long ago. A visit to any of the major museums in the world now shows that writing has been known, certainly from much earlier than the time of Abraham who lived about 2,000 years before Christ. Excavations at Ur in Mesopotamia, where Abraham came from, have unearthed libraries of clay tablets as well as bank records, trading accounts and hire purchase agreements. Writing in Ur consisted of wedge shaped characters made in clay with a shaped stick or pen. This writing is known as cuneiform. Records required for a limited time were dried to make the tablets hard. Permanent records were baked even harder.



Clay tablet with cuneiform writing and details of the wedge-shaped stylus used to impress the soft clay before drying

At the time when Moses lived in Egypt, writing was on papyrus with pen and ink. Records have survived on sheets made from the papyrus reed which was scraped, soaked and laid criss-cross, then pressed and dried. The natural gum made a good writing surface. There are many examples of the priestly, hieroglyphic picture writing in the British Museum in London as well as of the everyday, simpler script. Other permanent writing materials were parchment – scraped, stretched and dried skin – and vellum, a much finer material made from calfskin. Ink was made from finely ground charcoal in a thin gum or egg white.

Scrolls were made from sheets of parchment sewn together and could become very bulky; so when lengthy records had to be kept, successive scrolls were numbered. That is why in our Bibles we have the First and Second Books of Kings and the First and Second Books of Chronicles.

If a book was important – and the sacred books (scrolls) of the Jews were important – they would be copied with great care so that they could be read by more people in different places. In New Testament times, the letters to various groups of Christians were copied and passed to other groups: *‘After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea’* (Colossians 4.16 NIV).

The difficulty is that Jeremiah, like all the Old Testament writers, wrote mainly in Hebrew, and Paul wrote in Greek – as did most of the other New Testament writers. For us to be able to read the Bible in our own language is a real blessing. Many people over a long period of time were involved in making this possible.

The first major translation

When Egypt was part of the Greek Empire around 250 BC, the Emperor Ptolemy Philadelphus established a library at Alexandria.

His aim was to collect a copy of every important book, wherever it came from in the Empire. Josephus the Jewish historian describes the way in which the sacred books of the Jews were included in the library:

‘Demetrius Phalerius, who was library-keeper to the king, was now endeavouring, if it were possible, to gather together all the books that were in the habitable earth, and buying whatsoever was anywhere valuable, or agreeable to the king’s inclination, (who was very earnestly set upon collecting of books); to which inclination of his, Demetrius was zealously subservient’ (‘Antiquities of the Jews’ Josephus; Book XII, Chapter 2, Para.1).

We can understand how *‘zealously subservient’* Demetrius was. His life as well as his livelihood might depend upon how well he did. He was commanded to get in touch with the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem to arrange for a translation of the Jewish Scriptures to be made. He wrote to the High Priest who, Josephus tells us, wrote the following reply:

‘It is not fit for us, O king, to overlook things hastily, or to deceive ourselves, but to lay the truth open. For since we have determined not only to get the laws of the Jews transcribed, but interpreted also, for thy satisfaction, by what means can we do this, while so many of the Jews are now slaves in thy kingdom?’ (‘Antiquities of the Jews’ Josephus; Book XII, Chapter 2, Para. 2)

In other words, the High Priest was saying that they could work with much more enthusiasm if something could be done to deal with the ongoing problem of the number of Jewish political prisoners still being held. He did not say the work could not be done; the arrangements were already being made, but such was the keenness of

the Emperor to obtain the Jewish Scriptures in Greek, that tradition has it that he agreed to 100,000 Jews being released.

Six Greek and Hebrew scholars were selected from each of the twelve tribes of Israel and it is believed that eventually 72 scholars took part in the work. This important translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek became known as the Septuagint Version (Septuagint is from a Latin phrase meaning 'translation of the 70').

The Scriptures of Jesus and the apostles

In New Testament times copies of the Old Testament books were available in the synagogues in Hebrew but copies of the Septuagint translation of the books of the Old Testament into Greek were also available. Although the Greek Empire had now been succeeded by the Roman Empire, the language of the educated people for official purposes was still Greek. The language of the Jewish synagogue was Hebrew but the language of the home and the street was mainly Aramaic, an ancient Semitic language closely related to Hebrew.

On one occasion when the Apostle Paul had been arrested and was about to be taken into the Roman barracks by the soldiers, he said to the commander, *'May I say something to you?'* The commander immediately replied, *'Do you speak Greek?'* He thought that Paul was an Egyptian terrorist who had started a revolt sometime earlier. Paul asked permission to address the crowd, and he stood on the steps and *'...When they were all silent, he said to them in Aramaic: "Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defence". When they heard him speak to them in Aramaic, they became very quiet'* (Acts 21.37–40; 22.1,2 NIV).

The use of both Greek and Hebrew is very helpful to our understanding of the Old Testament (OT). When quotations are made from the OT by the New Testament (NT) writers, because the NT was

written in Greek, it is usually the Septuagint version of the OT that is quoted. Luke tells us that Jesus went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and he was given the roll of Isaiah to read. He found chapter 61 and read:

‘The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the **gospel** to the poor. He has sent me to heal the broken-hearted’ (Luke 4.18).

Jesus would have been given the roll written in Hebrew but because Luke is writing in Greek, he makes the quotation from the Greek Septuagint version. If we compare this with Isaiah chapter 61 in the OT, we read:

‘The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach **good tidings** to the poor; he has sent me to heal the broken-hearted...’(Isaiah 61.1).

You will notice that the NT reading from Luke has the word ‘*gospel*’ where the OT rendering is ‘*good tidings*’ (or good news). The difference is because Jesus is quoting from the OT book of Isaiah. Although we read both Testaments in English, the quotation in Luke has been translated twice – from Hebrew to Greek to English. However, this reminds us that the meaning of ‘*gospel*’ is ‘*good news*’ and if you look at a translation into more modern English like the New International Version (NIV), that is exactly what it says, ‘*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor*’ (Luke 4.18 NIV).

The value of an historical translation

The example above is a simple one that confirms the meaning of a word with which we were probably already familiar – the word ‘*gospel*’. Sometimes the value of a translation made before the time of

Jesus is much more important. Isaiah foretold that when the Saviour came, he would be born of a virgin:

‘...Behold, the **virgin** shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call his name Emmanuel.’ (Isaiah 7. 14)

Bible critics have claimed that the word Isaiah used and which is translated ‘*virgin*’, really means a young woman, so the prophecy does not have the special significance that Christians claim. It is true that the word in Hebrew translated ‘*virgin*’ can also mean a young woman. But what did Isaiah mean when he made that prophetic statement?

When Jewish scholars 250 years before the time of Christ were translating the prophecy of Isaiah into Greek (in the Septuagint Version), they used a Greek word which could only mean ‘*a virgin*’. Two and a half centuries before the time of Christ, the Jews themselves understood Isaiah to have prophesied that the Messiah, when he came, would be born miraculously of a virgin. The inspired NT writer Matthew leaves us in no doubt about the accuracy of the prophecy:

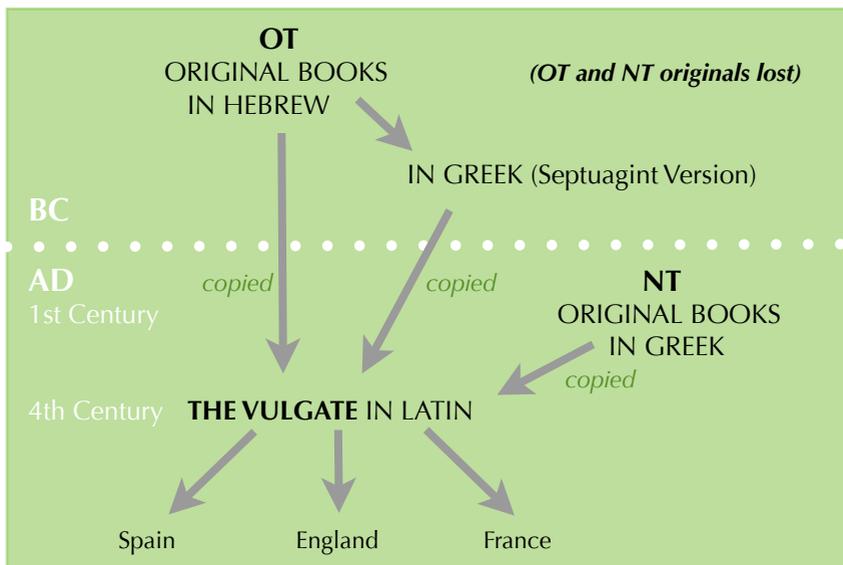
‘All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” – which means, “God with us”’ (Matthew 1. 22, 23 NIV).

The next major step forward

Up to the early centuries after Christ, the OT manuscripts in Hebrew had been copied and copied by hand for generations. The originals were no longer in existence but great care was taken in the copying and every manuscript was checked and re-checked. Because the books were sacred to the Jews, every letter of the text was counted before any copy was regarded as authoritative. The Greek translation was also available and many copies of this had been made too.

The NT manuscripts written in Greek were also being copied. As Christianity spread, so the copies were taken all over the Roman world. However, language was also changing. Latin was now the language of the Roman Empire and fewer and fewer people could read Greek. Because of this, a monk called Jerome made it his life's work to translate the Bible – both Old and New Testaments into Latin. His translation was called the 'Vulgate'. The English word 'vulgar' really means common or ordinary and the Vulgate was the Bible in the common or ordinary language – the language of the people. It was the Vulgate that was to be the Bible in use for many centuries.

This Bible came with Augustine to bring Christianity to the British Isles; it was the Vulgate which went with Christianity to Spain, to North Africa and to other parts of the world. Sadly, with the break up of the Roman Empire, fewer people could read the Bible for themselves. Latin was no longer spoken and they had to rely on priests and missionaries to explain what the Bible taught and often their teaching was biased.



Times change and language does too

As the years went by the cycle of change repeated itself. When Greek was spoken, the Hebrew Old Testament could not be read by people who did not understand Hebrew. Under God's good hand the Jewish Scriptures were translated into Greek (see chart on page 15). In the early centuries of the Christian era, the official language of the Roman Empire was Latin and so the work of Jerome was essential in enabling both Old and New Testaments to be read.

As has already been explained, it was the Latin Vulgate that came when Augustine brought Christianity to Britain in AD 597 – but people in England did not speak Latin so the work of translation had to continue.



THE ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS

The Anglo-Saxon spoken by the people of Britain was very different from the English spoken today, but the Bible was needed in Anglo-Saxon. By AD 709 Aldhelm, Bishop of Sherbourne, had translated many of the Psalms into West Saxon and 25 years later the Venerable Bede translated the Gospel of John. King Alfred, known by many people because of the story about him burning the cakes, translated a number of the Psalms in the early part of the 10th century AD.

History was moving on and so was the language of the people. AD 1066 was the date of the Norman invasion of England and the language was now being changed by being mixed with Norman French. No more Saxon translations appeared but the foundations of our modern English Bible were being laid. John Wycliffe was Master of Balliol College, Oxford. He resigned from this post to become priest of Lutterworth, and by the year of his death in 1384 he had completed his life's work of translating the whole Bible from Latin into English with the help of a group of faithful followers. This Bible was

hand-written and it would have taken about 10 months for a written copy to be made. So although the Bible was being written in the language of the people, it was not freely available.

The church in control

The extent to which people understood the teaching of the Bible was under the control of the priests who could quote from the Latin text and could not be contradicted. However, two great developments meant great changes in the Bible translation story.

First, more Bible manuscripts were coming to light and scholars were able to study the Bible not only in Latin, but by looking at copies of the Old Testament in Hebrew and of both Testaments in Greek. These could be compared with translations into Saxon but the authority of the church still limited access by ordinary people to the Word of God.

This was remedied by the second great change. The development of printing meant that once the type had been set up, copies could be made available in great numbers instead of it taking nearly a year to copy the Bible by hand. By the end of the 15th century, Bibles were being produced in French, German, Italian and Spanish and in 1530 the first printed Bible in English appeared. This was the work of **William Tyndale**, whose aim was to make the Bible widely available so that even a ploughboy could read it. William Tyndale said that if God spared his life, before



many years he would cause the boy that drives the plough to know more of the Scriptures than did the Pope.

His work was not approved by the clergy who saw their authority being eroded. Tyndale's copies of the New Testament were confiscated and burnt at the instigation of the Bishop of London. However, as the copies were taken, so more were printed on the continent and smuggled into this country. Eventually, Tyndale himself was betrayed, arrested and tried for advocating that people could themselves learn the Gospel from the Bible and he was burnt at the stake on 6th October 1536.

Se that ye gaddre not treasure vpon ye erth, where rust and mothes corrupte, and where theves breake through and steale. But gaddre ye treasure togeder in heve, where nether rust nor mothes corrupte, and where theves nether breake vp nor yet steale. For where soever youre treasure ys, there will youre hertes be also. The light of the body ys thyne eye. Wher fore yf thyne eye besyngle, all thy body shalbe full of light. But and yf thyne eye be wycked then all thy body shalbe full of derckenes. Wherefore yf the light that is in the be darckenes: how greate is that darckenes (Matthew 6.19-23 Tyndale's translation).

Erasmus

Another important development was the result of the work of a continental scholar, Deciderius Erasmus who worked for many years in England as a professor at Cambridge. He published a Greek NT text and a Latin translation. His work influenced Martin Luther and provided a sound basis for much of Tyndale's translation. Erasmus wrote:

'I wish the sacred Scriptures were translated into all languages of all people, that they might be read and known, not merely by the Scots and Irish, but even by the Turks and Saracens. I wish that the husbandman may sing parts of them at the plough, that the weaver may warble them at his shuttle, and that the traveller may with his narratives lighten the weariness of the way.'

Language was still changing; (Look at the passage from Tyndale on page 18 and compare it with how we speak today). This resulted in more and more translations and revisions appearing. The problem was that some Catholic translators added anti-Protestant footnotes to the text and anti-Catholic footnotes appeared in Protestant translations. The Israelites were told that there was no further need to bring gifts for the Tabernacle (Exodus 36.6,7). A footnote in one Bible says, 'When will the Pope say "Stop" and prevent people still bringing gifts to build St. Peter's?' Contemporary records show that there were arguments about the footnotes and arguments about which was the best translation.

In 1604, at a conference at Hampton Court Palace, King James 1 of England ordered a new translation because:

'In the Geneva translation some notes are partial, untrue, seditious and savouring of a traitorous conceit. To conclude the point, let errors of matters of faith be amended and indifferent things be interpreted and a gloss be added unto them.'

The King James version

In 1611 King James 'authorised' a new translation to be made. Forty seven scholars in six groups met at Oxford, Cambridge and Westminster. The title page says that it was '*Translated out of the Original Tongues* (so the scholars went back to copies of the Hebrew

and Greek Scriptures) *and with the former Translations diligently compared and revised by His Majesty's special command.*'

Language was still changing, as those of our readers who studied Shakespeare at school will know very well. For example, 'to prevent' means to stop something happening. The English word comes from the Norman French 'pre' (before) and 'venir' (to come) so at the time of Shakespeare and the King James Version (KJV) 'to prevent' meant 'to come before'.

Paul wrote (as translated in the KJV) that when Jesus returns, those that are alive will not 'prevent' those that are dead (I Thessalonians 4.15). He did not mean that those who are alive will not stop those who are dead. He meant that they will not 'come before', or have any advantage over those who are dead – because when Christ comes, *'The dead in Christ shall rise first'* (verse 16). The New International Version translates the verse:

'...we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not **precede** those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first' (I Thessalonians 4. 15, 16 NIV).

More recent translations

Many other words have changed their meaning and the 'old' verb endings ('cometh' instead of 'comes') and the use of 'thee' and 'thou' in the King James Version make the language of the text unfamiliar. (Note: there is a difference between saying the language is unfamiliar and criticising the translation itself).

However, towards the end of the 19th century it was felt desirable to produce the Revised Version. The whole Bible was issued in 1885 although the New Testament was available earlier. So there has been a continuous effort in the past century to make sure that the Bible is available in a language that is accessible to everyone. Some translations have been more successful at achieving this aim than others.

The New International Version, The New King James Version, The Good News Bible, among a number of others, have been produced by teams of scholars, checking and re-checking each other's work. In addition there have been a number of 'one man' translations. All have their supporters. All have various strengths and weaknesses being translations into the language of the ordinary people.

*Teach me, LORD, the meaning of your laws,
and I will obey them at all times.
Explain your law to me, and I will obey it;
I will keep it with all my heart.
Keep me obedient to your commandments,
because in them I find happiness.
Keep me from paying attention to what is worthless;
be good to me, as you have promised.
Keep your promise to me, your servant –
the promise you make to those who obey you*

(Psalm 119. 33–35, 37, 38 GNB)

What is important as far as the Bible student is concerned is that we are able to hold in our hands a book which brings before us the mind of God Himself. If we can read, we can be transported into events which demonstrate the unfolding of God's plan for the world. We can be brought close to teaching that can change our lives. We can find the

way of salvation and have the opportunity of learning the true Gospel message and eventually receive the gift of eternal life.

We can have all this by reading the Bible in our own language and by following its teaching. No minor blemishes of an imperfect translation can prevent this, whichever of the modern translations we read. Can we be sure of this?

An important question – an important answer

Can we be sure that we hold in our hands a book which can convey to us the mind of God?

We will look first at just one criticism of the reliability of the Bible in English. It has been said that if you look at the early history of the Bible, not just in the centuries immediately before the invention of printing but in the hundreds of years that followed the writing of the original manuscripts, because those manuscripts were copied and copied and copied, mistakes must have been made. Once printing was invented, the translations and versions were 'static' in a sense, but before that...? There are two main arguments (among others), which refute this criticism.

The Samaritan Pentateuch

When the Assyrians invaded and destroyed the kingdom of Israel, they evacuated the centre of the land and brought in remnants of other nations they had conquered to occupy the land and prevent the southern kingdom of Judah uniting again with the remnants of Israel. This mixed group became known as the 'Samaritans' because their capital was Samaria. At the time of Christ it was still said that 'the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans' (John 4. 9).

When the Samaritans first settled they felt they would only prosper if they adopted the 'local gods'. They obtained copies of the first five

books of the Jewish Scriptures (the Pentateuch) and for hundreds of years, with no contact with the Jews, they copied and re-copied them and adopted many Jewish religious practices.

If the copies of the copies of the copies of the Jewish Pentateuch had gradually included mistakes (and presumably the Samaritans might even be expected to have been less careful!), then, after a long period of time the Samaritan and the Jewish Pentateuch would have some significant differences. A number of important Jewish and Samaritan manuscripts have been discovered. They can be compared, and such was the carefulness of the copyists (under divine providence), that the critics cannot argue that the early documents are unreliable.

The Dead Sea Scrolls

Among these ancient scrolls discovered in 1947 at Qumran near the Dead Sea in Israel, are parts of most of the Old Testament books as well as some complete scrolls. The complete scroll of Isaiah is probably the most famous and received the greatest publicity.

The scrolls from Qumran date from well before the time of Christ and as far as the scroll of Isaiah is concerned, it jumps back a thousand years



The 28' long scroll of Isaiah from the Dead Sea caves

earlier than the oldest Hebrew manuscript of the prophecy then available. It suddenly became possible to compare copies of Isaiah a thousand years apart. If there were errors of copying it would immediately be apparent.

This is why the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls was so important (as well as being fascinating and faith stimulating). There can be no doubt that when we open our copies of the Bible and read in the English language what Isaiah has written, we are reading, as closely as we can get, to the thoughts and ideas that Isaiah wrote when he first penned them in Hebrew, words inspired by God. It was Isaiah who wrote, *'To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them'* (Isaiah 8. 20).

The inspired prophet Isaiah describes so vividly the kingdom that Jesus will establish when he returns (Isaiah chapters 2, 11, 32, 65). He also foretold the first coming of Jesus as the Saviour (Isaiah chapter 7.14-16 and chapter 53) and reminds us that when man was unable to save, God's arm brought salvation (Isaiah 59.15, 16, 20).

We said earlier – but we can now repeat it without fear of contradiction – that we are able to hold the Bible in our hands, a book which brings before us the mind of God Himself.



CAN WE TRUST THE BIBLE?

What do we really mean when we ask the question 'Can we trust the Bible'? Here are two definitions from the Concise Oxford Dictionary:

- ❖ **Confidence:** firm trust; assured expectation.
- ❖ **Trust:** firm belief in the honesty, veracity, justice, strength etc. of a person or thing.

When we talk about the Bible in these terms, we are asking whether we can believe firmly and strongly in the honesty and truth of what is

written in the Bible, whether we can rely on what it says and be able to depend on it.

What kind of evidence do we need?

Several years ago the writer was a witness to a road accident which resulted in a court case. One police officer on duty that morning said that the way the witnesses had all agreed was quite remarkable. He said that sometimes the witnesses do not even agree on the colour of the vehicles involved in the accident, let alone their estimates of the speeds they were travelling. The police officer then made a statement that has stuck in my memory:

‘When two or three people tell exactly the same story (and it doesn’t happen often) – it must have happened that way.’

An example from the Bible

Mark’s Gospel record tells us that on one occasion Jesus was followed by a great crowd when he wanted to go away quietly with his disciples. Because he felt they were like *‘sheep without a shepherd’* he began teaching them and continued for some while. The miracle of ‘the feeding of the five thousand’ is recorded in all four Gospel records. It is fascinating to see some of the finer details of these four written accounts. Matthew says that the people were made to sit down on the **grass** (Matthew 14.19).

Mark’s account tells us that the people sat down on the **‘green grass’** (Mark 6. 39). John says *‘There was much grass in the place’* (John 6.10). John also tells us that it was the time of the Passover. All these statements fit exactly together. In the climate of Israel, for much of the year the grass is sparse, dried and brown. The time of year when grass is plentiful is in springtime – the time of the Passover – when in the words of the Gospel writers there would be much grass and the grass would be green.

There is another detail that links the Gospel writers' accounts. Luke says that the miracle took place near Bethsaida (Luke 9.10). John tells us that Philip was the disciple that Jesus asked about buying food (John 6.5). These two apparently unrelated facts become significant when we learn that Philip was from Bethsaida (John 1. 43, 44). This was his home so he was the obvious one to ask about buying food there.

'When two or three people (or four!) tell the same story – it must have happened that way.'

Here is a pointer to the answer to the question we started with – can we trust the Bible? There are other examples of detailed corroboration in the Gospels and in many other places in the Bible. The books of Kings and Chronicles contain parallel accounts of much of the history of Israel. The prophet Isaiah was contemporary with King Hezekiah and these accounts agree with each other, sometimes in very small details.

As was explained earlier in this booklet, the Bible claims to be the Word of God. The Apostle Paul wrote that the Scriptures were ***'inspired by God'*** – that is, the writers wrote because God 'breathed into them' what He wanted them to write. That is the meaning of the word 'inspired'. We have already quoted the Apostle Peter's words that Bible prophecy *'never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit'* (2 Peter 1. 21 NIV).

Another kind of harmony

Think of what we have learned about the Bible so far:

- ❖ A library of 66 books divided into two groups
- ❖ The Old Testament was written before Christ
- ❖ and the New Testament after Christ
- ❖ There were 40 writers of the books
- ❖ The books were written over a period of 1,500 years

- ❖ They were written in widely separated countries – Babylon, Greece, Israel, Egypt, Italy, Asia Minor etc.

These different writers, separated by time and distance, are not only in textual harmony but their teaching on fundamental issues is also in complete harmony. Think about the teaching of the Bible concerning our natural state (in contrast to what many people believe today).

The book of Genesis explains that we are mortal, that is ‘subject to death’ and this is the result of man’s disobedience to God. This disobedience is called ‘sin’ and Paul wrote in New Testament times that *‘the wages of sin is death’* (Romans 6. 23). ‘Death’ in the Bible refers to complete extinction and unconsciousness at the end of life. David in the Psalms and Solomon in the book of Ecclesiastes, hundreds of years after the book of Genesis and later the writings of the prophets, all teach the same thing:

‘Like sheep they are laid in the grave...’ (Psalm 49. 14)

‘His spirit departs, he returns to his earth; in that very day his plans perish.’ (Psalm 146. 4)

‘...there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going.’ (Ecclesiastes 9.10)

‘...the soul who sins shall die.’ (Ezekiel 18.4)

‘...they shall be as though they had never been.’ (Obadiah 16)

In spite of the fact that the Egyptians (who held the Israelites as slaves for a long period) had a strong belief in an after life – as did the Assyrians and Babylonians later and the Romans in New Testament times – the consistent Bible teaching through the centuries is that men and women die because of sin; the dead are unconscious and it is only

a hope in the resurrection that can allow us to look beyond the eternal grave.

‘...as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned’ (Romans 5. 12).

‘For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord’ (Romans 6. 23).

‘...now Christ has risen from the dead, and has become the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man came death, by man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive...Christ the first-fruits, afterwards those who are Christ’s at his coming’ (I Corinthians 15. 20-23).

One of the strongest evidences for the inspiration of the Bible is the consistency of its teaching and the complete harmony of its records – despite the long period during which it was written.



THE EVIDENCE OF ARCHAEOLOGY

Archaeology has confirmed many of the historical records in the Bible. The cuneiform writing on the Taylor prism in the British Museum gives the Assyrian account of the events described in 2 Kings chapters 18 and 19, 2 Chronicles chapter 32 and Isaiah chapters 36 and 37.

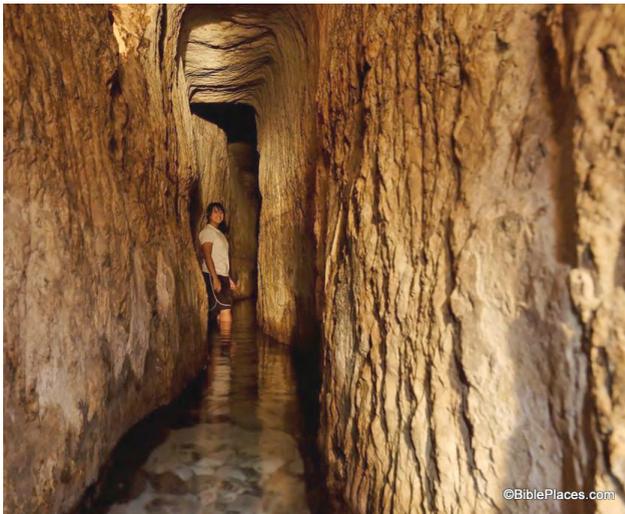
The Assyrian record says: *‘I besieged Hezekiah of Judah who had not submitted to my yoke and I captured forty six of his strong cities and fortresses, innumerable small cities which were round about them, with the battering rams and the assault engines and the attack of foot soldiers...himself (Hezekiah) like a caged bird I shut up within Jerusalem his royal city’.*

Many details in this record (and others) confirm the Bible account. However, the Assyrian record does not say how Sennacherib the Assyrian king was defeated after Hezekiah had prayed for God's help. The Assyrian account simply says that Sennacherib returned to his own royal city of Nineveh. Isaiah had recorded, *'By the way that he came, by the same shall he return; and he shall not come into this city, says the LORD'* (Isaiah 37. 34).

The period of the Assyrian and Babylonian empires is rich in tablets and monuments relating to nearly all their kings who are also mentioned in the Bible. The British Museum's own publications provide a wealth of fascinating material for the Bible student.

Hezekiah's tunnel

There have been times when the Bible critics have said that something just could not have happened. The Bible gives an account of the way that Hezekiah had a water course constructed through the rock to bring water into Jerusalem to make sure that there was a good water supply



for the city when the Assyrians invaded. At the same time access to the springs outside the city was blocked up:

'This same Hezekiah also stopped the

Inside Hezekiah's tunnel today

water outlet of Upper Gihon, and brought the water by tunnel to the west side of the City of David. (2 Chronicles 32.30 - see parallel account in 2 Kings 20). The critics said at one time that the science of engineering was not developed sufficiently at the time of Hezekiah to enable this conduit to be constructed. This cannot be said today because the tunnel from outside the old city of Jerusalem into the Pool of Siloam has been discovered. In addition, near the entrance was an inscription written in the Hebrew characters of Hezekiah's time which records the construction of the tunnel.

Archaeology does not directly **prove** the inspiration of the Bible but the confirmation it provides for so many of the Biblical records, gives us confidence that we can trust its historical accounts.



THE EVIDENCE OF PROPHECY

This is the line of evidence that God Himself has given us to strengthen our faith in His Word. The Bible does not only teach us that God **knows** how His purpose is to be worked out but also that He **declares** *'the end from the beginning'* (Isaiah 46.10) and that He **reveals** what He intends to do through His servants the prophets (Amos 3.7). We can look at the history of Israel for specific examples of prophecy fulfilled and fulfilling – *"You are my witnesses," says the LORD* (Isaiah 43.10). Two examples from Israel's history will illustrate the point.

First example of fulfilled prophecy

Abraham was the father of a nation that had a very chequered history. There were times when they displayed confidence and trust in God and as a nation wanted to gain His approval. When God made a covenant with them at Sinai they said: *'All that the LORD has said we will do, and be obedient'* (Exodus 24.7). There were other times when the people were faithless and disobedient to God's commandments. During the

period when they were ruled by Judges, it was said that *'everyone did what was right in his own eyes'* (Judges 17.6).

Abraham's son was Isaac, and his grandson was Jacob. Jacob (whose name was changed to Israel) had 12 sons and the story of Joseph, sold by his jealous brothers as a slave into Egypt, is recorded in the book of Genesis. Because of famine, eventually the whole family settled in Egypt where they prospered and multiplied. After the death of Joseph there began a period when the Hebrews (the descendants of Jacob) were forced into slavery by the Egyptians who were worried that in time of war the Hebrews might support the enemy. This period of slavery did not end until the time of Moses and the Exodus, *'At the end of the 430 years, to the very day, all the LORD'S divisions left Egypt'* (Exodus 12. 41 NIV). This was 430 years after Abraham had entered the land of Canaan (now Israel).

Why is this important?

After Abraham had settled in Canaan, he was given a vision in which he heard the voice of God, *'I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward'* (Genesis 15.1). Then in response to Abraham's prayer and as a sign that God's hand would be seen in the history of Abraham's descendants, we read in Genesis:

'As the sun was setting, Abram (Abraham) fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. Then the LORD said to him, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and ill-treated four hundred years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterwards they will come out with great possessions.'"

(Genesis 15.12-14 NIV)

After the time of Jesus, when the Jewish authorities were persecuting the early Christians, Stephen referred to this prophecy and its fulfilment. Stephen was on trial for his life. He was arguing that God had made promises to Abraham that are the basis of the true Christian hope. His accusers ought to have known their own history. They should have known that in their history was the evidence that God was in control all the way through. Stephen, in his defence speech, went through the main events from the time of Abraham:

‘...God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land, even though at that time Abraham had no child. God spoke to him in this way: “Your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and ill-treated for four hundred years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves...and afterwards they will come out of that country and worship me in this place”’ (Acts 7.5-7 NIV).

Here are the key points of this example:

- ABRAHAM** was told of the oppression of his descendants. The actual time period was given (Genesis 15).
- ISAAC** had two sons – Jacob and Esau (Genesis 25).
- JACOB** had twelve sons – Joseph – Egypt (Genesis 37-50).
- MOSES/
EXODUS** The exact end of the 430 years (Exodus 12).

After the time of Christ, Stephen used this as evidence that God’s hand can be seen at work in the history of the Jews confirming the words of the prophet: *‘You are my witnesses’* (Isaiah 43. 10).

Second example of fulfilled prophecy

The first king of the nation of Israel was Saul. He was later followed by David and Solomon. After the death of Solomon the kingdom was divided into a northern kingdom of Israel (which was eventually destroyed by Assyria) and a southern kingdom of Judah which lasted 100 years longer than the kingdom of Israel. The prophet Jeremiah who lived in the closing days of the kingdom of Judah when Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, was invading the land, wrote:

‘I will banish...sounds of joy and gladness...This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon for seventy years.’

(Jeremiah 25. 10, 11 NIV)

Here is a very specific time period. Not only was the land desolated by the Babylonian armies, but also thousands of captives were taken to Babylon. One of these was a young man of noble birth – Daniel. He was to become prominent in the Babylonian court and eventually was made ruler of one of the three major provinces of the empire. In spite of the honours he gained, he was a Jew and his heart was always looking for the restoration of Jerusalem.

Babylon eventually fell to the Medes and became part of the Medo-Persian Empire. Daniel was now a very old man and there is a wonderful passage in the book that bears his name in the Bible:

‘In the first year of Darius son of Xerxes (a Mede by descent), who was made ruler over the Babylonian kingdom – in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the LORD given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years. So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer...’

(Daniel 9. 1-3 NIV)

Daniel had read the book of Jeremiah and understood his prophecy of the 70 years captivity. He knew he was now living at the end of this time – so he prayed to God.

The rich archaeological evidence from this period enables the dates to be identified fairly accurately. Seventy years after the fall of Jerusalem, Cyrus the Persian, the king who followed Darius, made a decree that the Jews should be allowed to return and rebuild Jerusalem. Other conquered nations were given similar privileges (again as Jeremiah had foretold).

In these examples we have two specific time periods. Each was foretold in advance and the end of each is also recorded. These are only two of many examples of prophecies detailed in advance. The history of Israel, with all its ups and downs; its invasions and captivities; its sieges and the long period of almost 2,000 years desolation following the Roman occupation, followed by the restoration of the nation in the 20th century – has been described as an ‘impossible history’. Yet almost every stage was the subject of prophecy, demonstrating the truth of the prophet Isaiah’s words:

‘...you are my witnesses, says the LORD, that I am God’ (Isaiah 43.12).

This evidence supports our trust

We can be confident. The only explanation for the wealth of fulfilled, detailed prophecy relating to nations, cities, individuals and events, is that the Bible is a revelation from God Himself. The writers were inspired. Its claim to be the Word of God is well founded.

The evidence of:

- ❖ the Bible’s textual harmony
- ❖ the unity of its message

- ❖ its miraculous preservation
- ❖ the testimony of archaeology
- ❖ the witness of fulfilled prophecy

all testify that the Bible was written because the writers were moved by the Holy Spirit. It was written because the writers were inspired by God. This is the only explanation of its uniqueness.

Can we trust the Bible?

In the fullest sense of the question, the answer must be 'Yes'.

If then the Bible is the Word of God, we have a responsibility to read it, to listen to its message and to act upon it!



A VITAL MESSAGE FOR US TODAY

Wherever we are in the world and whatever language we speak, we can read the words of Moses and the laws that were given to the nation of Israel many centuries ago. We can listen to the sublime message of the Old Testament prophets as they looked forward to the coming of the Saviour.

We can understand the message of Jesus himself as he showed the shallowness and hypocrisy of the leaders of his day and as he spoke about the purpose of his death and resurrection. He taught his hearers about the coming of the kingdom of God – and all this we have in our own language.

We can follow the exciting story of the development of Christianity in the first century, the establishment of the first churches and we can hold in our hands, in a form that can be easily understood, the letters that were written to those early Christian communities. Their needs were so like our own. The inspired teaching in these letters is just as relevant today.

So...do something about it!

It is good to know something about the background to the Bible but the important thing is to allow it to influence your life. Don't just treat it as something of academic interest. Read the Bible for yourself so you can understand more of its message for today. If the Bible has come from God, if this holy book is God's Word to us then... **do something about it.** Read the Bible so that you can know what God has revealed about Himself and about His purpose.

If the Bible does contain prophecies about individuals and nations, about cities and events – which have been fulfilled in the smallest details, we can be confident that other prophecies are certain to be fulfilled, including prophecies about God's plan for the world, about the return of Jesus and the events that will herald his 'Second Coming'. We can be certain that when the Bible foretells a time in which all of the world's problems will be solved, then that time will come.

'For he (God) has fixed a day in which he will judge the whole world with justice by means of a man he has chosen. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising that man from death!'

(Acts 17. 31 GNB)

BIBLE ABBREVIATIONS

There are various versions of the Scriptures published by many different organisations. The following lists some of these versions and the common abbreviations in use:

King James (Authorised) Version	KJV
Revised Standard Version	RSV
New King James Version	NKJV
New English Bible	NEB
New International Version	NIV
English Standard Version	ESV
Good News Bible	GNB

Preface by the Translators to the King James Version AD 1611

'...how shall men meditate in that which they cannot understand? How shall they understand that which is kept close in an unknown tongue? ...Translation it is that openeth the window to let in the light; that breaketh the shell, that we may eat the kernel; that putteth aside the curtain, that we may look into the Holy place, that removeth the cover of the well, that we may come by the water...'

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