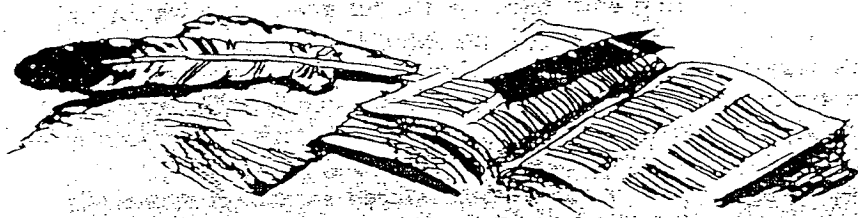


T Egypt 40  
P 200 BC  
J 90  
A Athanasius  
S 367  
SL 205  
RE 1550

# THE BIBLE: Its Books, Chapters, And Verses



By Lynne Deming

A wandering nomad did not find our present-day Bible buried in the desert sand. The verses of Scripture that we read, quote, and live by are the end result of a long process in history. This process involved both the formation of the canon and the division of the Bible into chapters and verses.

The word *canon* comes from a Hebrew word meaning *stalk or measuring reed*. The prophet Ezekiel used this Hebrew word to describe how the measurements of the future temple would be taken. In Ezekiel's vision, he used the measuring reed to measure the temple wall that was to separate "the holy and the common." (See Ezekiel 42:16-19.) Later the word came to designate a *rule* or a *norm*. Canon is now used to refer to the sixty-six books of the Bible.

*How was the Old Testament canonized?* Traditionally, the Old Testament canon has been divided into three major parts: the Law (Torah), the Prophets, and the Writings. The first step in forming the canon took place between 450 and 400 B.C. During this restoration period after the exile, Ezra advocated the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament) as the foundation of the post-exilic community. As a result, the Torah became fixed in the minds and hearts of the Jewish people.

About 200 B.C., Jewish scholars collected the prophetic books for use by the worshipping community. The exact date is uncertain, but we know from the introduction to the apocryphal book, Ecclesiast-

icus, that the phrase *the Law and the Prophets* was in use by 130 B.C.

About A.D. 90, a group of Jewish leaders gathered to canonize the Writings. The site of this council was the city of Jamnia on the coast of Palestine. These scholars were reacting to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in A.D. 70, when the Jews were dispersed and lost their sense of identity as a people. The rabbis wanted to compensate for this loss with a body of scripture that was reliable and unalterable.

*How was the New Testament canonized?* The steps in the canonizing of these books are not as clear as those for the Old Testament. The New Testament canon was not fixed until nearly A.D. 400. The beginnings of New Testament canonization grew out of a divided church whose leaders saw a need for unity. They believed that a fixed body of scripture could help achieve this unity, just as the Jews after A.D. 90 recovered their loss of identity by adopting the Old Testament canon.

Before A.D. 367 the New Testament consisted of twenty-two books, including the four Gospels and fourteen letters. During the two centuries after the writing of the New Testament documents, the church leaders were undecided about the canonicity of the remaining writings (mainly the pastoral epistles). In 367, Athanasius, a bishop from Alexandria, provided a list of canonical books. This collection corresponds to our present-day New Testament. So it was not until around A.D. 400 that the term *Bible* was used to mean the same collection of books that we read today.

DR. DEMING, writer of this article, is a member of the editorial staff of the Adult Publications Department of the Curriculum Resources Committee for The United Methodist Church.

The earliest manuscripts of the Old Testament books were written in consonants with no vowels and no separations between words. Imagine the problems involved in this method of writing. Here is an example:

*nicestartinthecompetition*

This phrase could be read in two different ways depending on the spacing of the words: nice-start in the competition, or nice-art in the competition. This method of writing in the original manuscripts has caused some translation problems. Jeremiah 23:33 is a good example. Depending on word division the verse could either read: "... you shall say to them: You are the burden..." or "... you shall say to them: What burden?" In most cases a look at the surrounding context can solve this puzzle.

The lack of vowels in the original Hebrew manuscripts also caused problems in interpretation. One series of consonants could sometimes have a variety of meanings. Consider the consonants *bd* in English. Placing various vowels in between these consonants will yield a number of different meanings: bad, bed, bid, bud.

Combining the problems of string-together words and a lack of vowels must have complicated the situation even more. Consider the phrase *nicestartinthecompetition* without its vowels: *ncstrtnthcmptn*.

The scholars responsible for ordering the chaotic Old Testament manuscripts were called the *Masoretes*. These scholars were members of two prominent and learned Jewish families. Deriving from a Hebrew word meaning *tradition*, their title signifies their love for the traditional text. The *Masoretes* worked on these manuscripts from the eighth to the tenth century A.D. The result of their labors is the *Masoretic text*.

The manuscripts the *Masoretes* worked on had been transmitted aloud from generation to generation. This oral tradition was helpful as a guide for the meaning of the text. The *Masoretes* added the vowels to the text, spaced the words, and divided the text into verses. These verses were not numbered until about 500 years later.

The *Masoretes* produced the Hebrew text we now use for English translations of the Old Testament. For the New Testament text the process was more complicated. Rather than having one single New Testament manuscript, we have at least 5,000 manuscripts of the various books. So the Greek

version of the New Testament that is the basis of today's English translations combines what scholars consider to be the best manuscript available for each book.

*How was the Bible divided into chapters and verses?*

Stop and think for a minute what we would do without these divisions. We would have no easy way to refer to particular stories or verses. Our efforts to locate quotations would be like trying to give directions to someone's home without knowing the street or the number of the house.

This same problem faced a group of scholars in Paris early in the thirteenth century. The Bible was undergoing a series of important changes during this time. Perhaps the most important of these was the insertion of chapter divisions into the text.

Apparently, up until then several alternatives had been proposed. But each group of scholars used a different system. The general population used whatever system was available in a given area.

At last, in 1205, a man named Stephen Langton, who later became the Archbishop of Canterbury, standardized these chapter divisions in the books of the Bible. The chapters which Langton placed in his edition of the Scriptures are the same divisions that we have in our Bibles today.

*What was the final step in this process?* The development of our present-day Bible was still not complete. The addition of verse divisions and numbers occurred in the middle of the sixteenth century. A printer and editor from Paris named Robert Estienne (also called Robert Stephanus) produced the first complete English translation to contain verse divisions.

This French printer wanted to include a concordance of the New Testament in his edition of the Bible. But just imagine the problems he must have encountered with no verse numbers to use for referral! So Estienne numbered the verses that were included in the chapters marked off by Langton. We follow these numberings today.

*Learning God's righteous ordinances (Psalm 119:7) is a task to which we have all been called. It is difficult to imagine achieving our goal without the help of verse and chapter numbers, divisions between words, and a canon containing a standard collection of books. The contributions of such scholars as Estienne, Langton, the members of the Jamnia Council, and the Masoretes have had lasting benefits for us. As you teach your class next Sunday morning, stop and think what you would do without these contributions.*