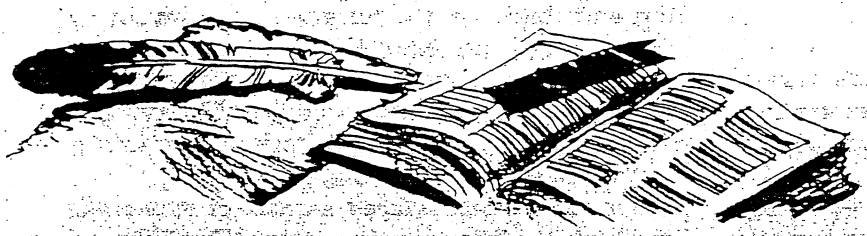
T = Ezra, 400 BCE
P = Prophets, 200 BCE
J = 90 CE
A = Athanasius, 367
M = Masoretes, 1000
5000 = Manuscripts
SL = Stephen Langton, 1205
RE = Robert Estienne, 1550

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 ıd result of a long process in history. This process ıvolved 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 worshiping community. The exact date is uncertain, but we know from introduction to the apocryphal book, Ecclesiasticus, 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.

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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 nicest 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 strung-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 is 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. □

The Bible—Whose Word Is It?

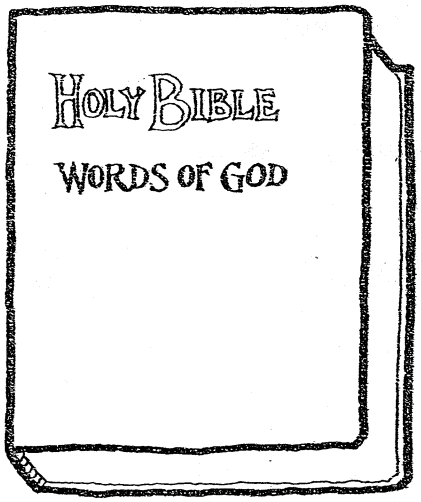
The Greek word for *inspired* means "God-breathed," and it appears only once in the Bible: "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). "Inspired" or "God-breathed" means that God has in some way breathed into these words a divine and creative Spirit, just as God breathed life into us when we were created out of the dust of the ground.

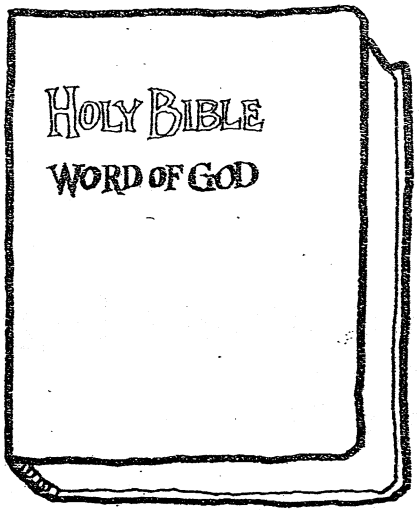
So Scripture is God-breathed or inspired. We believe that it comes from God. But exactly how is the Bible inspired? How *did* God breathe the creative Spirit into the Bible? In what way does the Bible come from God?

Below are three different understandings of how the Bible is the Word of God. Read them carefully. Then decide which one you agree with most.

1. The Bible is the Words of God

The Bible is a record of the exact words of God, words that God dictated to the biblical writers. Because God inspired every word that these persons wrote, there are no errors in the Bible, no inconsistencies, and no parts of the Bible that are less inspired or less important than other parts. When you read the Bible, you have to read it word-for-word. It means *exactly* what it says, whether it is talking about creation happening in seven days or what heaven will look like.

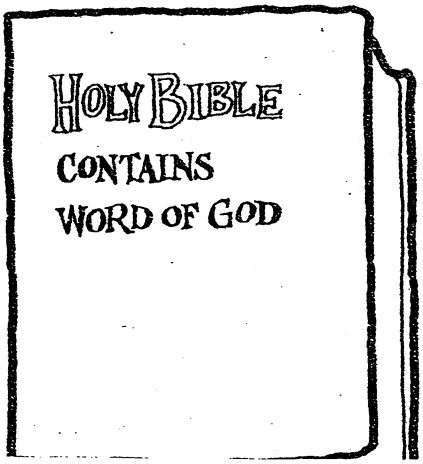




2. The Bible is the Word of God

The Bible is the Word of God because it tells about God's presence in the world as Creator, as Christ, as Holy Spirit. But God didn't dictate it word-for-word. Instead, the biblical writers wrote, in their own words, their experiences of God's action in their lives, in other person's lives, and in the life of the world around them.

The Bible, then, is human words about God. These human words are "inspired" because they come from the writers' personal experiences with God. But they are still human words, and so they are sometimes inconsistent with each other or tell the faith story from different viewpoints, or contain errors. But these differences and errors don't really matter because you don't read the Bible word-for-word. You read it to find the Word *of* God behind all the human words *about* God.



3. The Bible contains the Word of God

The Bible contains God's Word because it contains information from and stories about the patriarchs and prophets, the disciples, the Letters, and Christ. It is human words about God and inspired by God, but not all of the Bible carries the same weight. The real purpose of the Bible is to tell us about Christ. Christ is the most important Word of God and the Bible tells stories about Christ.

Journey into Faith

A Confirmation Resource for Junior Highs

by Helen R. Neinast & Sidney D. Fowler

1984