



How We Got the Old Testament

I. Who Wrote the Old Testament?

Ultimately, it was God Himself.

God supernaturally inspired the human authors.

- 2 Pet. 1:19-21 – “men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”
 - Illustration: A journalist riding on a boat down a river, documenting the scenery. He has no control over what he sees along the way, but dutifully writes down everything he is shown.
- 2 Tim. 3:14-17 – “All Scripture is breathed out by God.”
 - Illustration: A master musician skilled at playing a variety of wind instruments, such as a flute, clarinet, trumpet, or tuba. Each instrument creates music, but with a different sound than the other instrument. Similarly, God chooses the right prophet to create the right book.
 - Also note: Without the musician blowing into it, the instrument would not make any sound. The instrument (i.e., the prophet) needs the Musician (i.e., God) in order to make music.
- Mark 12:36-37 (quoting Psalm 110:1) - “David himself, in the Holy Spirit, declared, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet.”’ David himself calls him Lord. So how is he his son?”
 - Illustration: Jesus said that David was speaking “in the Holy Spirit.” But Jesus also said “David himself calls him Lord.” So David is the speaker, but he is not making this statement on his own. He is saying it “in the Holy Spirit.” Again, it is the combined action of both the speaker (David) and God (the Holy Spirit) to produce scripture.

Implications:

- The OT is inerrant (free from error) since God cannot lie. (John 17:17; Heb 6:18)
- Any theory about multiple authors or late authors that contradict what the Bible claims about itself should be rejected. For example ...
 - The Documentary Hypothesis (JEDP Theory), which claims that Moses did not write the Pentateuch.
 - Multiple authors for the book of Isaiah.
 - A late date for the book of Daniel (implying that Daniel did not write the book).

However, the means God used to deliver His message was human authors.

As such, the personality, experience, vocabulary, and style of each human author played a role in the formation of Scripture. This accounts for the wide variety of writing styles we see in the Old Testament (like a master musician playing a variety of instruments).

It should also be noted that the human authors of the OT came from all walks of life:

- Kings (David & Solomon)
- Governor (Nehemiah)
- Priests (Ezekial, Ezra)
- Member of the Royal Court (Daniel)
- Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc.)
- Warriors (David & Joshua)
- City Guard (Habakkuk)
- Shepherds (Moses, David, Amos)
- Farmer (Amos)
- Musicians (David, Asaph, Sons of Korah)

II. When Was the Old Testament Written?

The Old Testament was written gradually over the course of 1,000 years. The process started during the time of Moses and continued through the time of Malachi, Ezra and Nehemiah.

- Moses wrote the first 5 books during the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness (ca. 1446-1406 B.C.).
- Malachi probably prophesied sometime between 433-424 B.C., and the last chapter of Nehemiah covers events after Nehemiah's return from Persia around 424 B.C.
- By 400 B.C., the entire Old Testament was complete.

III. What Languages Did God Use to Speak to Us in the Old Testament?

Hebrew: used in every passage except for the places listed below.

Aramaic: used in ...

- Genesis 31:47. "Jegar-sahadutha" is Aramaic for "heap of witness."
- Jeremiah 10:11. The entire verse was written in Aramaic, perhaps so the Gentiles of that day could read it for themselves.
- Ezra 4:8-6:18, 7:12-26; and Daniel 2:4b-7:28. These are copies of Aramaic letters, along with some narrative sections of the book.

IV. How Did the Old Testament Come to Us Today?

Original Text

The original texts of the Old Testament were created when God spoke through a person and those words were recorded in written form.

- Since God is the One who was directing the author, the original form of the writing was without error.

"The inerrancy of Scripture means that Scripture in the original manuscripts does not affirm anything that is contrary to fact."

– Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, Zondervan, 1994), 90.

Transmission of the Text

Although the original manuscripts were free from error and although during many periods of history extreme care was taken to correct scribal errors, over time some errors have crept into the text.

For example, see how 1 Samuel 13:1 is translated in the following versions:

- KJV
 - "Saul reigned one year; and when he had reigned two years over Israel,"
- ESV
 - "Saul lived for one year and then became king, and when he had reigned for two years over Israel,"
- NIV
 - "Saul was thirty years old when he became king, and he reigned over Israel forty-two years."
- NRSVUE
 - "Saul was ... years old when he began to reign, and he reigned ... and two years over Israel."

The large variety of translations is due to the fact that there are two numbers missing from the Hebrew text (see the blank spaces in the NRSVUE translation). This scribal error apparently happened very early in history, leaving textual critics fewer options to restore the text to its original state.

The good news is that this is the *worst* scribal error in the Old Testament, and it does not affect any core doctrines of the Christian faith.

Examples of Common Scribal Errors:

- Misreading similar letters: for example the letters 7 and 7
- Skipping a word, phrase, or line.
- Writing something once that should have been written twice.
- Writing something twice that should have been written once.
- Switching letters or words.
- Dividing words that should have been united.
- Uniting words or letters that should have been divided.

Recovery of the Text (Lower Textual Criticism)

The discipline of Lower Textual Criticism seeks to correct these scribal errors and restore the text to its original state. For the vast majority of cases, this task is simple because the errors are obvious. For example, anyone familiar with English and with Proverbs 1:7 can correct the simple errors in the following sentence:

*"The feer of the Lord is th beginnning of knowledge;
Eools despsie wisdom and and instruktion"*

For the harder cases, there are several criteria that are used to help determine the original text. The preferred reading is the one that ...

- is older.
- is more difficult.
- is shorter.
- best explains the variants.
- has the widest geographical support.
- conforms to the style and diction of the author.
- reflects no doctrinal bias.

Note that Lower Textual Criticism is vastly different than "Higher Textual Criticism" which deals with more theoretical issues such as the JEDP theory mentioned above.

- Lower Textual Criticism deals with hard facts.
- Higher Textual Criticism deals with speculative theories (often with little evidence to back them up).

How close can we get to the original text?

Extremely Close! After discussing the tools used in lower textual criticism, two credible Christian scholars state this:

"Not only is the Bible the most well-preserved book to survive from the ancient world, its variant readings of significance amount of less than one-half of one percent corruption, none of which affect any basic Christian doctrine. In addition, the textual critic has at his disposal a series of canons [manuscripts] which for all practical purposes enables him to completely

restore the exact text of the Hebrew and Greek autographs of the Scriptures—not only line for line, but even word for word.”

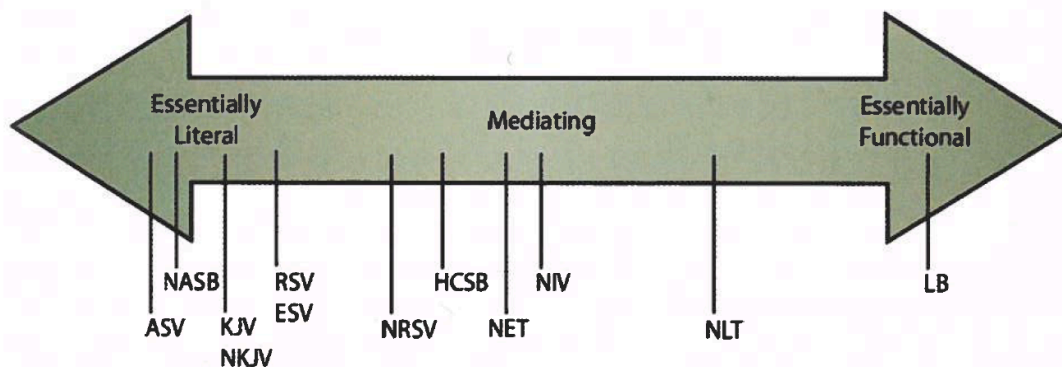
--Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, From God to Us: How We Got Our Bible (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), 186.

Translation of the Text

Once the original text has been recovered (as best we can determine), then it needs to be translated into a language that is used by societies today. However, before doing the work of translation, translators need to decide what type of translation they are setting out to produce.

Types of Translations

There are a spectrum of translation philosophies, ranging from “Essentially Literal” translations to “Essentially Functional” ones. The following chart plots several common versions along this spectrum:



Elmer L. Towns & Ben Gutierrez, The Essence of the New Testament: A Survey, 2nd ed. (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 11.

- **Straight word-for-word:** At the extreme end of the “Essentially Literal” side of the spectrum, a translator could seek to translate every word in the Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic text as literally as possible. This sounds great ... until you start to read a straight word-for-word translation for yourself. Since different languages use different grammatical structures, going straight from Hebrew into English produces a translation that is extremely difficult (and at times, impossible) to understand.
 - o “Blessedness of the man who not walks in the way of wicked ones, and in the path of sinners not stands, and in the seat of scoffers not sits. For in the law of Yahweh is the delight of him, and in the law of Him he meditates day and night.” (Psalm 1:1-2, literal translation by Dr. Rodriguez)
- **Smoothed word-for-word:** Since a straight word-for-word does not produce a text that people can actually understand, many translations move farther down the spectrum and smooth out the rough spots. The result is much more comprehensible, but still tries to stay true to the vocabulary and grammar used by the original author in the original language.

- o “How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, Nor stand in the path of sinners, Nor sit in the seat of scoffers! But his delight is in the law of the Lord, And in His law he meditates day and night.” (Psalm 1:1-2, ESV)
- Thought-for-thought: Other translators point out that really what is happening when we communicate is that we have a thought in our head that we then choose a certain set of words to describe. But that same thought could be expressed with a different set of words. So instead of concerning themselves with the exact vocabulary and grammar of the original text, a translator may choose a “thought-for-thought” translation that seeks to accurately communicate the thought of the original author, but expressed in a different way.
 - o “Oh, the joys of those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or stand around with sinners, or join in with mockers. But they delight in the law of the Lord, meditating on it day and night.” (Psalm 1:1-2, NLT)
- Paraphrase: At the far end of the “essentially functional” side of the spectrum, a translator will paraphrase the thoughts of the original author in their own unique way. Often a paraphrase version of the Bible will use one of the other English translations as a starting point, instead of providing a fresh translation from the Greek, Hebrew, or Aramaic text.
 - o “How well God must like you— you don’t walk in the ruts of those blind-as-bats, you don’t stand with the good-for-nothings, you don’t take your seat among the know-it-alls. Instead you thrill to God’s Word, you chew on Scripture day and night.” (Psalm 1:1-2, MSG)

What type of translation is best?

Given the spectrum of options, this is a valid question. The answer is ... It depends on how you want to use it.

- For a deep study of the text, a more literal translation is helpful so that you can focus on the exact grammar and vocabulary used by the original author as they were inspired by the Holy Spirit.
- For devotional reading, some people find that a thought-for-thought translation or a paraphrase is helpful since they are quicker and easier to read.

But the important thing to remember is that all types of translations (as long as they are conveying the truths inspired by God) can be considered to be “breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16).

V. How Were the Books of the Old Testament Selected? (Canon)

How were the OT books selected?

No one knows for sure all the details of the process, but we can make some educated guesses. In their textbook, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, Andrew Hill and John Walton provide the following list of probable causes that led to the 39 books of the Old Testament being included in the biblical canon.

- Recognition of the text as divinely inspired: "Foremost was the quality of inherent divine inspiration and authority recognizable to the leaders of the Hebrew religious community through illumination by the Holy Spirit."
- Recognition of the author as a spiritual authority: "By and large the human writers of the books incorporated into the Hebrew canon held divinely appointed offices of leadership such as lawgiver, judge, prophet, priest, and king."
- Examination of teaching within the book: "the content of the individual books was examined for internal consistency of teaching and overall unity of theme and message with the covenant experience recorded in the other books recognized as 'word of the Lord.'"
- Frequency of use in public and private worship: "the use of particular documents and books by the Hebrew religious community no doubt influenced canon selection. Those books read, studied, copied, and obeyed by the Israelites came to be recognized as canon."

Andrew E. Hill & John H. Walton, A Survey of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 490.

Overarching Principles:

No matter what the details were, the following two overarching principles should be remembered ...

- The Holy Spirit guided the process: "In the final analysis, we have to assume the same Holy Spirit who inspired the human authors to write the books also superintended the Hebrew leaders during the canon selection process." (Hill & Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, p. 490.)
 - If the Holy Spirit went to the trouble of inspiring a book to be written for us, do you think He would allow that book to be lost to history?
- Leaders did not *declare* a book as canonical, but merely **recognized** a book as canonical: "Later rabbinic and church councils did not determine canon, but merely affirmed or stamped their approval on the collection of divinely inspired and authoritative books already acknowledged as 'word of the Lord' in the religious community." Hill & Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, p. 492.
 - Conspiracy theorists like to say that the books of the Bible were chosen by a select group of leaders and that the decision was from the top down. In reality, it was from the bottom up. The community of God came to a consensus on their own about which books belonged in the Bible, and the leaders merely affirmed that consensus.

How to Read the Old Testament

I. The Overarching Principle

Always seek to pull the meaning out of the text, not put your own meaning into the text.

Imagine a child opening a birthday present, throwing away the gift inside, and replacing it with a toy she already owned. If that happened, we would think the child had gone crazy.

But so often, Christians do the same thing with God's Word. We open our Bibles, wanting God to say "yes" to our plans, our goals, and our agenda. And when we run across a verse that doesn't say what we want it to say, we twist it to say what we want or we explain it away so that it doesn't apply to us.

God's Word is a gift to us. He has placed a certain meaning within each verse that is important for us to understand. If we ignore that meaning and seek to put our own meaning into a verse, that would be like taking a birthday gift, throwing it in the trash, and putting an old toy we already own back in the gift bag.

To avoid this error, we should use the grammatical-historical approach to Scripture.

II. Grammatical-Historical Approach

"Readers of Scripture must understand the **grammar** and the **historical** setting of the passage in order to understand correctly and apply any passage with confidence."

—Elmer L. Towns & Ben Gutierrez, *The Essence of the New Testament: A Survey*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 15.

Practical Strategies for Understanding a Passage:

- Read each verse within its context. Don't read verses in isolation.
- Don't ask, "What does this mean to me?"
- Instead ask, "What did this mean to the original audience?"
- Consider what genre you are reading.
 - Is this prose or poetry?
 - Is this a historical narrative, a psalm, or a prophecy?
- Seek to understand the vocabulary and grammar of the passage.
- Seek to understand the historical and cultural situation.
- Think about where this passage fits in redemptive history. Is this something that only applied to ancient Israel or does it also apply to the church?

- Ask, "Is this story descriptive or proscriptive? Is this story just explaining what *did* happen, or is it instructing me on what *should* happen?"
- Look at everything God has revealed to us on this topic. Interpret unclear passages in light of clear passages.

III. The Proper Order to Studying the Bible:

Understanding first ... Application second.

Illustration: Before you use a car to drive from Point A to Point B, you have to understand how a car works. You *must* sit in the driver's seat. You *must* use the steering wheel and gear shift. You *must* use the accelerator and brake pedals. If you use a car improperly, you can seriously injure yourself and other people.

Similarly, before you use a passage from the Bible to make a life-changing decision, you have to understand how that passage works. If you don't fully understand a biblical passage, you could do significant damage to your life and to the lives of others.

Once you have done your homework by studying the grammar and the historical setting of the passage, *then* you are in a position to start applying the text to your life.

Practical Strategies to Apply a Passage

Once you understand the meaning, seek to apply it. Ask yourselves questions such as these:

- Is there a direct command in this passage that applies to me today?
 - When dealing with the Old Testament, keep in mind that many of the commands given to Ancient Israel under the Old Covenant do not apply to Christians living under the New Covenant.
- Is there a principle in this passage that I need to follow?
 - Most often this question is more helpful. You are not an ancient Israelite, but you can learn timeless principles about how God wants his people to live by studying what He said to the ancient Israelites.
- What does this passage tell me about God's character and attributes? How does that affect my relationship with him?
 - God's character and attributes do not change over time. So by studying the Old Testament, you grow in your understanding of who God is.
- How can I imitate the righteous people in this story?
- How do I stumble in the same way as the sinners in this story?

- Based on this passage:
 - Is there something I can praise God for?
 - Is there a belief I need to change?
 - Is there a behavior I need to change?
 - Is there something I need to pray about?

IV. The Application Principle:

As you study the Bible, there is one last concept you should keep in mind ...

One interpretation, many applications.

Illustration: There is only one proper way to operate a car, but many different places that car can take you. Once you understand how a car works, there are various ways to use or apply it. The same car can take you across town to get groceries or across the country to visit relatives.

Similarly, there is one correct interpretation of each passage of scripture, but many applications of that passage to people's lives.

One interpretation, many applications.

- The one interpretation is the meaning which the original authors (human & divine) put into the text.
- The application of that meaning will vary from person to person, place to place, and time to time.

Once you understand that one meaning, then you can look for various ways to apply it.

The application of a text will be different for people living in different times, different cultures, and different historical situations. But the interpretation of a text should be the same for everyone.

- o A student in the United States and a pastor in Zimbabwe studying the same passages ideally *should* come to the same interpretation. But how that passage is then applied to each of their lives will look very different since they live in different settings and different stages of life.