

BEYOND TODAY

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How the Holy Bible came together

Even many professing Christians find the Bible a mysterious book filled with ancient writings that can seem of little relevance in our digital age. The God who inspired the Holy Scriptures, however, is a God for all time with a plan that transcends the ages.

Britain has been called a “post-Christian” society. Few are taught even the basics about why Christ’s followers believe the Holy Bible is the word of God. Yet the Bible claims to be the very word of the true God and that Christ’s followers should be living by all the instructions found within its pages (Matthew 4:4).

The Bible is a manual intended by God to show human beings two things: It shows us how to live, and it is a guide to God’s plan for the salvation of mankind. As the apostle Paul wrote to his fellow minister Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:15-17: “. . . 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.”

“Holy Scriptures” in verse 15 means words that were divinely inspired by God and here refers specifically to the Old Testament as the New was not yet available.

The canon of the Bible

Opening a Bible for the first time can be daunting. It seems a huge undertaking and a bit intimidating. How was the Bible put together? How do we know the Bible contains the books that it should have? These are impor-

tant questions concerning the canon – the group or list of books that are considered to be inspired by God.

The Bible contains the books (originally written on scrolls) that are acknowledged or understood to be the divinely inspired words of God. They were written by various historians, priests, prophets and kings over a period of at least 1600 years. Writings cover events such as the Creation and the Flood; histories of Israel, Judah and their respective kings; God’s rules and regulations for living healthy and fulfilling lives, including instructions on how to strengthen our relationships with God and our fellow man; and prophecies concerning the future salvation of the vast majority of human beings through Jesus Christ.

Chapter breaks were only added in the thirteenth century and verses in the sixteenth century. These additions sometimes do marginal damage to the text, for example a chapter break can occur in the middle of an account, but have the great advantage of making it easier to find various passages quickly.

The Old Testament or Hebrew Bible

The books of the Old and New Testaments were written and canonised beginning in the 15th century BC with the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) and finishing near the end of the first century after Christ with the book of Revelation. No historian has left an account of

the steps taken in this long process. However, we do have titbits of information here and there that give us some knowledge regarding what took place.

Over the thousand years during which it was written, the Old Testament underwent at least five periods of canonisation. Ezra, a priest and scribe, apparently was the one responsible for the final collection and arrangement of the books of the Hebrew Bible (what we call the Old Testament) around 450 B.C. With this canonisation the Old Testament was essentially complete.

Jesus Christ affirmed His acceptance of the three divisions of the Old Testament – Law, Prophets and Writings (or Psalms after its first and largest book) – as canonical. Notice His statement in Luke 24:44: “These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.”

The New Testament

No one is certain how the New Testament canon came together. In A.D. 397 the Synod of Carthage confirmed as canonical the 27 books of our New Testament, but it really only recognised that these books had been in use and read in the churches for some three centuries.

One theory holds that the apostles Paul, Peter and John were the final canonisers of the New Testament and that John, with the help of other believers, was able to finish and distribute copies of the entire 27 books to the churches in Asia Minor and the Holy Land.

This view finds support in several New Testament passages. Peter, writing to the early Church, commented that he considered the letters of Paul part of the “Scriptures” (2 Peter 3:15-16). He was putting the writings of the apostle Paul on an equal footing with the Old Testament Scriptures. This indicates that the apostles already considered some of their writings to be divinely inspired and deserving of inclusion in the canon of Holy Scripture.

Paul appears to have helped in selecting which books and letters, particularly of his writings, were to be preserved for us. In 2 Timothy 4:13 he asks Timothy to “Bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas when you come – and the books, especially the parchments.” This is a puzzling request, unless Paul was asking Timothy to bring books and letters from which he would select those that would be part of the canon. Some of his letters, such as the one to the church in Laodicea mentioned in Colossians 4:16, were not preserved. Presumably those Paul chose were then passed on to other apostles.

It seems most likely that the apostle John, who outlived all the other apostles, under God’s inspiration made the final selections of the writings that would be included as Scripture in what we know as the New Testament. In

the final chapter of the final book of the Bible, John gives a warning that appears to indicate that the Bible was then complete with nothing more to be added or taken away. “If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book” (Revelation 22:18-19).

Which Bible translation is best?

More than 60 English-language versions of the Bible are available. Scholars divide them into three broad types: word-for-word, meaning-to-meaning (also called thought-for-thought) and paraphrased. Usually a particular Bible version will explain, on its introductory pages, which approach was used in preparing it.

Word-for-word versions most accurately follow the Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek texts. Generally speaking, the King James Version and its modern counterpart, the New King James Version, are word-for-word translations.

Meaning-to-meaning versions, such as the New International Version (NIV) can be valuable in putting the Scriptures into more understandable wording. The Revised English Bible, Good News Bible and New Living Translation are other popular meaning-to-meaning translations.

Paraphrased Bibles, such as The Living Bible or The

Whichever Bible translation you choose, the most important factor is that you actually read it and learn to live by it.

Message, also can be useful. Their goal is to make the Bible even easier to read in modern language. Caution is needed when working with these, because the authors exercised considerable “poetic license” in interpreting biblical terms and passages according to their own personal religious ideas. Paraphrased versions can be consulted to better grasp the story flow but should not be relied upon exclusively to establish doctrine or for accurately determining the meaning of any text.

Many Bible versions are now available as part of Bible software packages or for free viewing on various Internet sites. With these, you can compare different versions nearly instantaneously. Whichever Bible translation you choose, the most important factor is that you actually read it and learn to live by it.

For more information, including sections on “Seven Scriptural Threads for More Complete Understanding,”

fifteen “Keys to Understanding,” and “Does the Bible Contain Errors,” please request or download our booklet *How To Understand the Bible*. Also request *Is the Bible True?, You Can Understand Bible Prophecy* and our 12-lesson *Bible Study Course*.

Abridged from “How Did We Get the Bible?”, July-August 2004 Good News and the section on “Different translations and other Bible helps,” pages 24-32 of How To Understand the Bible.

A “stash” may survive its owner, but for how long?

Many people collect various items for projects they intend to complete at some time in the future. When death claims the life of the owner, many such plans may be unfinished, or not even begun. Might there be something more important to accomplish in our lives?

Several programmes on British television follow the rescue and restoration of old cars, furniture or other household or industrial items rescued from the local scrapyard, tip or storage. Teams of experts repair, renovate or rejuvenate the salvage to a usable condition, maybe by restoring it completely, or by taking it back to a functional albeit worn state, or by up-cycling it into something totally different from its original purpose.

Those seeking such projects often come across hoarders with enough projects to last for several lifetimes. It is quite probable that the presenters themselves have similar stashes of projects awaiting attention. Some allow collections of projects to overwhelm them, thereby ending up wrecking their homes, relationships and lives.

The thrifty among us may have collected broken household items, tools and equipment, planning to repair them in due course. Garages and homes can be full of such projects. Knitters may have a stash of wool, those who love needlework a collection of unopened cross-stitch kits or bags of fabric, card-makers boxes of unopened embellishments.

As worthwhile as these pursuits may be, and it is wonderful when a plan comes to fruition, it's as if we believe we have forever to accomplish these tasks.

Wise King Solomon looked at all the projects he had worked on – and he had some tremendous accomplishments – and said: “Then I looked on all the works that my hands had done and on the labour in which I had toiled; and indeed all was vanity and grasping for the wind” (Ecclesiastes 2:11).

He also bewailed the fact that, as the expression goes, “he couldn't take it with him” when he died. “Then I hated all my labour in which I had toiled under the sun, because I must leave it to the man who will come after me. And who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will rule over all my labour in which I toiled and in which I have shown myself wise under the sun. This also is vanity” (Ecclesiastes 2:18-19).

Towards the end of his life, Solomon recognised the need to seek God early and not to leave it until death approached. He advised, “Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth, before the difficult days come, and the years draw near when you say, “I have no pleasure in them” (Ecclesiastes 12:1). The verses that follow give a poetic list of the difficulties old age can bring (verses 2-7).

On the day we die all our plans come to an end (Psalm 146:4). Could we have better balanced our time seeking God and building relationships rather than spending it on over-accumulating projects that realistically would never be done and could yet end up in a skip, from where they may have been rescued in the first place?

Solomon summed up with, “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all. For God will bring every work into judgement, including every secret thing, whether good or evil” (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14).

To begin building or to enhance a relationship with God, please request or download our booklet *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion*.

Barbara Fenney

Humanity: *God's special creation*

Humans were made in God's image for a reason and the Bible tells us why.

The first book of the Bible records that God created animals and plants to reproduce after their own kind. In modern-day terms, He encoded the DNA within them so that dogs neither produce cats nor do roses produce lilies.

Genesis also recounts the creation story explaining that human beings are unique. We are the only creatures able to drastically change our environment – expanding our horizons by creating beautiful landscaped gardens



Horses reproduce after their own kind – in this case a foal.

S Saxin

and defending ourselves by building fortresses. Man even has the ability to harness the awesome power of the atom, engage in space travel and build sky-high edifices. Nothing in the animal kingdom comes close to these creative capabilities.

However, there is an additional element to the creation story account not said of any other life form in the physical universe: “And God created man in His *own image*, in the image of God He created him, male and female He created them” (Genesis 1:27). That includes every

human being – without exception. But why was man made in God's image? What purpose was there in creating human beings with God-like capabilities that are so much greater than those seen in the animal kingdom?

A clue is given in the fifth book of the Bible: “. . . man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD” (Deuteronomy 8:3). Animal and plant life do not have the capacity for a relationship with God, to learn His ways or become like Him.

The price paid for rejecting God's Word

Both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament teach that there is a direct link between being created in the image of God and living by God's standards as reflected in Scripture. As human beings we have the option to act upon the instruction given in God's Word – to live by it or not. Merely believing that we are “created in the image of God” without applying the biblical instruction on how to live misses the point entirely.

The moral instruction of God's Word is, to a large extent, absent in today's world – the Bible being ignored or discarded far more often than it is read. That is unfortunate, given that being created in the image of God physically allows every human being to actually be transformed into His image spiritually too, encapsulating His very character attributes – in other words to become God-like. To accomplish this, however, there must be a willingness to live by every word of God.

Although the ultimate decision remains with each individual, God's desire is that we choose life not death. No one is forced to do His will – man was created as a free moral agent. Were God to force everyone into line, character wouldn't be developed. God does however, warn His creation of the pitfalls of rejecting His way of life.

The physical creation of man is merely the first step in God's plan to lead humankind into becoming members of His divine Family. Today, however, the world is heading in

a direction that denies that man was created in the image of God. Consequently, there is neither a clear vision of man's future nor a recognition of an ultimate purpose to life. This has led to discarding the morality that many past generations professed to believe, even if they didn't always practise it.

The young in particular live in a confused world with conflicting standards. As a result they allow their lives to be heavily influenced by a shallow celebrity culture, preventing them from setting worthwhile goals. All too many tend to belittle themselves by undervaluing what they *can* achieve in the midst of being constantly bombarded with false values and vain pursuits that have no place in the lives of those created in God's image.

Developing spiritual character

Whether young, middle-aged or elderly, knowing God's plan for humanity should serve as an incentive and encouragement to step out and face life's many challenges.

When God's Spirit joins with our human spirit, we are begotten as God's literal children.

God's Word gives us direction on how to succeed in life as well as revealing a meaning to life. Life's ultimate purpose is to develop God's spiritual image in us, as reflected by His divine Son, Jesus Christ. Human beings have the capacity, with God's help, to develop His character. There is a process through which this can be achieved.

Following the Exodus, God through Moses challenged His people with these words: "See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil, in that I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in His ways and to keep His commandments, His statutes and His judgements . . ." (Deuteronomy 30:15-16). In verse 19 He advised the Israelites to "choose life." The point here is that spiritual character is only developed when human beings willingly choose to obey God's Word in all they do and say.

In the process of developing God-like attributes, it is the Almighty alone who decides what is right and what is wrong. The prophet Isaiah states this clearly: "I, the LORD, speak righteousness, I declare things that are right" (Isaiah 45:19). Here we see that, human traditions notwithstanding, it is God's prerogative to define right and wrong.

Some 800 years after Isaiah's time, the apostle Peter wrote that those who are willing to obey God's Word are able to be "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). This is only accomplished by living by God's Word. No easy task, but God did ask this of the Israelites through

Moses and Christ re-emphasised the need to base our lives on God's Word (Matthew 4:4). When we do this, we begin to shed the negative elements of our human nature and instead develop the divine nature that Christ exemplified who, according to Hebrews 1:3, expressed the very image of God perfectly. Physically created in God's image we can learn moral standards that are spiritual in nature.

The missing dimension

In the New Testament John the Baptist baptised people with water but he said of Christ: "I indeed baptise you with water, but He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit" (Mark 1:8). God's Spirit, which is given to us after baptism, is essential in order for us to receive the gift of everlasting life. That is if we live a life that is pleasing to God the Father and His Son as outlined in God's Word.

After he had sinned greatly, King David pleaded with the Almighty not to take that precious Spirit from him with the following words of repentance, "Do not cast me away from Your presence, and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me" (Psalm 51:11). The God of Israel that David worshipped is merciful and forgave David's sins once he acknowledged them and repented.

God declared of the children of Israel, "Oh, that they had such a heart in them that they would fear Me and always keep all My commandments, that it might be well with them" (Deuteronomy 5:29). It is the same today. Nonetheless, God has made it possible for us to have our hearts changed. With God's Holy Spirit residing in us we can break away from our natural, carnal way and please our Heavenly Father continuously, even though we may slip up at times.

The Spirit of God leads us into biblical truth, as indicated in John 4:24: "God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and in truth." Jesus also stated, ". . . The Spirit of truth . . . dwells with you and will be in you" (John 14:17). That is a promise from God to those who have repented of their sins and acknowledge their responsibility for the death of Jesus. The very Spirit of God the Father and of His Son, Jesus Christ, takes up residence in us at baptism through the laying on of hands by God's minister (1 Timothy 4:14).

The apostle Paul explained that, when God's Spirit joins with our human spirit, we are begotten as God's literal children (Romans 8:14-16). As long as we continue in God's way, at the return of Christ and the resurrection of the dead we shall be born into His spiritual family (Romans 8:29; 1 John 3:1-2; 1 Corinthians 15:49).

So, how well are we doing? Do we constantly express the spiritual nature of Jesus Christ? Our ultimate destiny requires that we do so. To study further please request or download our booklet *Why Were You Born?*

Gerhard Marx

Silence can enhance our relationship with God

All around us there seems to be noise, background music and the need for distraction. Yet it is often through silence we can grow closer to God.

Modern society seems to fear silence. This may be the reason noisy music is prevalent in so many shops, offices and homes. Some seem unable to function without some sort of distraction in the form of noise. It is as if people fear their very thoughts, as if something they think might compel them to re-assess their lives, find them wanting and require them to make changes.

A popular song from the 1960s was entitled “Silence is Golden.” While the lyrics are of little relevance here, the title is even more true today because, no matter where you are, silence is so hard to find. It has become a very valuable commodity.

Why Christians should seek silence

Christians should not fear to seek out silence. In silence it is easier to reflect on God and His will and how we can more carefully follow Him and bring “every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). Change is essential to a believer’s life and peace and quiet are conducive to godly meditation on such matters.

King David often meditated on God’s ways as a boy while he tended his father’s sheep. In the days long before all-pervasive music and clamour, David meditated on the word of God both day and night. He wrote: “Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day” (Psalm 119:97). It wasn’t as if David didn’t like music. In fact he was a skilled musician who wrote many psalms – hymns or sacred songs. When he became king, he also organised the singers and musicians for the future temple in Jerusalem (see 2 Chronicles 35:15, for example).

Abraham’s promised son, Isaac, also sought solitude and quiet in the fields in the evening to contemplate God’s words (Genesis 24:63).

Value of time in a quiet place

The prophet Elijah actually heard God speaking to him in a “still small voice” after a display of strong winds, a powerful earthquake and fire (1 Kings 19:9-13). Elijah had just been through a turbulent period in his life,

having contended with the prophets of the pagan god Baal. Through God’s power he had defeated them, but their patron, Queen Jezebel of the 10 northern tribes of Israel, had passed a death sentence on him. Thoroughly demoralised, Elijah had fled to the wilderness where God tenderly cared for him (1 Kings 19:2-18).

Elijah’s experience teaches two lessons to the disciples of Christ: Firstly, that God does not always answer prayers in a spectacular fashion and secondly, it shows the value of time in a quiet place away from worldly distractions.

Today God does not speak to people by voice because He has recorded for us all we currently need to know through His Son, Jesus Christ. The book of Hebrews records, “God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds” (Hebrews 1:1-2).

The word of God should always be in our hearts and minds as we learn it and apply its principles to our lives today.

Through the indwelling Holy Spirit, these inspired words of God can be brought to mind when we need them, provided we have studied them in the first place. The word of God should always be in our hearts and minds as we learn it and apply its principles to our daily lives.

Today it is not always safe to go out somewhere by night, but perhaps we can find somewhere beautiful and peaceful to sit, maybe in a park or garden, where we can ponder the words of God and the changes we need to make to become more like Him. Stillness and quiet amidst nature can be very beneficial.

Silence can indeed be golden if we can find it and use it to enhance and develop our relationship with God.

Philip Perry



Q To what extent did Adam and Eve understand God's purpose for humankind was that they were to rule in God's Kingdom?
Reader from Tavistock

A When we read the Bible from beginning to end, we see that spiritual knowledge was revealed sparingly at first, and as time went on more detail was revealed and recorded for posterity in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. In Genesis 3:15 we get an inkling of God coming to the rescue of mankind by a Seed (offspring), later revealed as Christ, "bruising the head" of Satan for provoking the first human family to disobey God. This is the first indication in Scripture that God would provide a Saviour. Adam and Eve already knew that sin would lead to death (Genesis 2:15-17; compare Romans 6:23), so this would give them hope.

At the time of Moses and the Exodus the Passover was introduced, as God saved His people from captivity in Egypt in Old Testament times. This was a forerunner of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ to save all humanity from the power of sin and death. This may have been reflected in the Garden of Eden when God made tunics for Adam and Eve from animal skins after they had sinned (Genesis 3:21). The death of the animals could have brought home

Let the Bible Answer...

What does the Bible say about miracles?

God can perform signs and miracles: Deuteronomy 6:22; Daniel 4:1-3; Acts 2:22.

Examples of false prophets performing miracles include: Exodus 7:8-12, 22; Matthew 24:23-24; 2 Thessalonians 2:9; Revelation 13:11-15.

For guidance on how to differentiate see Deuteronomy 13:1-4; 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12; 1 John 4:1-3.

to them the enormity of what they had done.

As the Sabbath was made for mankind (Mark 2:27), and looks back to Creation (Exodus 20:11) and forward to the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth and the rest for all people (Hebrews 4:1-10), it is likely that God would have explained this to Adam and Eve on the very first Sabbath He spent with them (Genesis 2:1-2) and however many Sabbaths He spent with them after that, before Satan deceived them into disobedience.

Adam and Eve certainly knew about having dominion – rulership – over the earth and its creatures, because God had explained this to them (Genesis 1:26-28). The Bible is silent on whether they knew the full extent of that dominion and that it would eventually include the entire universe – “all things” (Hebrews 2:8).

Q I believe the Bible teaches that at death we sleep in the grave, but how could Moses and Elijah appear with Christ in the transfiguration?
FAQ

A Recorded in Matthew 17:1-13, Mark 9:2-13 and Luke 9:28-36, the accounts of the transfiguration tell us that Jesus took three of His disciples onto a mountain, where they saw Him “transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light” (Matthew 17:2). He then appeared to converse with Moses and Elijah. Luke records that they “appeared in glory and spoke of His decease which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem” (Luke 9:31).

Jesus told Peter, James and John to “tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man is risen from the dead” (Matthew 17:9). So the disciples saw a vision of the future, not something that was actually happening in their time.

The apostle Paul writes that at death a Christian's body is “sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory” (1 Corinthians 15:43). When Christ's followers are resurrected at Christ's return to earth, they will be “raised in glory.” However, Christ's resurrection to His glorified form made Him the “firstborn from the dead” (Revelation 1:5). Since Christ is first, it is impossible that Moses and Elijah were resurrected to glory before Christ. This helps show that the transfiguration was only a vision of things to come.

Around eight days earlier in Luke 9:27, Christ told a crowd (which included Peter, James and John) that “there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the kingdom of God” (see also Matthew 16:28 and Mark 9:1). The Kingdom of God is not yet here, but everyone in that crowd has “tasted death.” Christ's statement was fulfilled when three of His apostles witnessed the transfiguration on the mount, a vision of that same Kingdom.



Letters From Our Readers

Beyond Today programme on YouTube

I watch all your *Beyond Today* programmes on YouTube and enjoy studying the material you send me. I don't know of anyone as experienced in God's work as your organisation. Thank you and please renew my subscription.

Reader from Grimsby

Editor's comment: Beyond Today programmes are also archived on our website www.ucg.org/beyond-today/beyond-today-television-program.

Articles relate to everyday life

I like your articles because they are related to everyday life. This makes them really useful, easy to understand and gives a practical link between the Bible and life.

Reader from Newcastle

Thank you very much for your magazine. It is very informative and helps me understand the Bible and today's happenings, that are otherwise very difficult to understand or assimilate.

Reader from Norwich

Beyond Today makes it easier to understand the prophecies coming true in our world today and to accept what is happening and why.

Reader from Exeter

A source of strength

I'd love to continue receiving your magazine. It is a source of strength and hope for me at this time.

Reader from Edinburgh

Thank you so much for the privilege of receiving your magazine. It gives me the strength to carry on.

Reader from Bude

Hope of a better world to come

I appreciate all the magazines as they really inspire me to hear what God wants us to do and how His Kingdom would be better than this world's kingdoms.

Reader from Merthyr Tydfil

The Lord will come back – He has to, otherwise with the weapons we have we would wipe each other out. The Lord won't let that happen. The world belongs to Him, not us.

Reader from Dundee

Thank you for *Beyond Today*. I look forward to each issue. As I am in my late 80s, it allows me to see more hope for the future for my grandchildren and great grandchildren.

Reader from Ipswich

From our Bible Study Course students

I found the course very thought-provoking. I have started to go through it again. This time I will go through it more slowly.

Student in Peterborough

Please carry on sending me the lessons. I have learnt so much with this Bible study.

Student from Redruth

This [Bible study course] is transformational to me. My life is changing for the better and for good.

Student in Manchester

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