



Transmissions and Translations of the Bible, Part 1 (800 BCE to 1000 CE)

By Brennan Breed

We tend to think of the Bible as a book—and we’re not entirely wrong, as it is one of the best-selling books of all time—but the Bible wasn’t always a bestseller or even a book. The Bible we know today took a long journey through many eras, peoples, and places before it became the sacred text we recognize today.

The word “bible” comes from the Greek word *biblia*, which means “books.” This is a more accurate description of what the Bible is—a collection of many books, like a library. Each biblical book has a unique history and took a distinctive route on its way to inclusion in the Bible.

Many authors in very different places and times wrote and edited the books that compose the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament; all told, this process extended over a thousand-year period. There are many guesses about when people began writing the books that are now found in the Hebrew Bible. Traditionally, Christians and Jews dated the earliest biblical writings to the time of Moses, which might have been in the middle to late second millennium BCE (ca. 1500–1200 BCE [Before the Common Era = BC]) Many scholars now claim that the earliest biblical texts were written down around the eighth or even seventh century BCE (ca. 800–600 BCE). For most ancient texts such as the Bible, the exact dates of composition are unrecoverable.

In the ancient Near East, at the time when the biblical books were written and copied, **scribes** did the work of composing and preserving important documents. Scribes were special because they could read and write; literacy was not widespread.

The earliest biblical writings were written on **scrolls** made from Egyptian **papyrus** (a plant-based paper) or animal skins that had been scraped, burnished, and stitched together. It is very likely that all biblical books were initially written on scrolls.

Only in the second or third century **CE** (Common Era = AD, or *anno domini*) did scribes begin to write on papyrus or parchment paper that was folded and stitched into a **codex**, which more closely resembles our modern print book. After the invention of the codex, Christians tended to copy their scriptures into codex form, while Jews traditionally copied their scriptures into scroll form.

Scribes were also editors. Some took several different scrolls with something in common and compiled a single book out of them. Sometimes, scribes in different places edited similar scrolls in different ways. Let's say, for example, that one Jewish scribe living in Jerusalem had six or seven scrolls all about the prophet Jeremiah and wrote them together as the book of Jeremiah. But perhaps another Jewish scribe living in Alexandria, Egypt, has only three or four scrolls about Jeremiah; he copied them in one book and also called it the book of Jeremiah. Then the two **versions** of the book of Jeremiah began to circulate and were used by different communities. All of this occurred numerous times before there was even a "Bible" as we know it.

The biblical books had to be copied over again and again so that they could be preserved for other people to read them. The process of rewriting the books of the Bible was not always perfect—sometimes mistakes were introduced or words were added or dropped. We call this whole process, including the accurate copies and the mistakes, the **transmission** of the text. That is, the text is transmitted (and sometimes changed) by scribes who copied the ancient scrolls over and over again.

In time, editions of these books were collected and religious communities gradually narrowed down the list of books they deemed authoritative. However, different communities used different criteria. This process of including certain books as Scripture and rejecting others is called **canonization**.

Of course, the books of the **Torah** (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible) were seen as especially holy from at least the second century BCE. But even in the first century CE, soon-to-be-biblical books such as Esther, the Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Ezra, or Tobit were not easily distinguishable from books such as Jubilees, 4 Ezra, or 1 Enoch, which were just as sacred to many people at the time but did not make it onto many canonical lists.

A list of books that are considered Scripture for any particular group of people is called a **canon**. This word comes from a Greek word meaning "measuring stick" and refers to a group opinion about whether or not a book "measures up" to being called Scripture. Jewish and Christian communities have different canons because Christians include the books of the New Testament in their Scripture. Within Christian tradition, Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant communities have slightly different canons. Even among Eastern Christian traditions, there are very different canons, too. (See the "canon chart" link below.)

Adding to the confusion, there are different languages in which we may now find the text of the Bible. We call these different versions **translations**, because someone took the original Hebrew or Greek words and put them into another language. But, in order to make a **translation**, someone had to make a decision about which edition was the version to translate. In other words, if there were three different versions of the book of Jeremiah in Hebrew, which one should be translated, say, into Greek?

What follows is an overview of the major versions and translations of the biblical text. Others exist, but the ones discussed below are important because of their historical value as well as their continuing value to various contemporary communities of faith.

Masoretic Text (MT)

The large majority of biblical scholars believe that a particular group of texts known as the Masoretic group are, with some exceptions, the most authentic and accurate versions of the Hebrew Bible (what Christians sometimes call the Old Testament). These texts were painstakingly copied by a group of Jewish scribes known as **Masoretes**, who in the seventh to eleventh centuries CE carefully went through all the existing biblical scrolls, searched for and noted inconsistencies, and added vowels to the Hebrew originals.

Their work of **transmission** matches up surprisingly well with much more ancient scrolls later found in the Dead Sea region of Israel; in other words, the decisions they made about assembling the most accurate version of the original texts of the Hebrew Bible have largely been affirmed by modern discoveries of ancient religious texts. The most important Masoretic medieval manuscript is Codex Leningrad, which dates to 1009 CE.

The Hebrew Bible was written originally without vowels or accents; this is because the written Hebrew language did not represent vowels until the Middle Ages. To preserve traditional spoken readings, a system of **vocalization** (writing in vowels) arose between 500 and 700 CE. Though the Masoretic scribes added vowels to the ancient text long after it had been written, they were preserving the vowels that people had memorized from the time the texts were written or edited.

Today, the Masoretic Text is the version held as authoritative and used liturgically in most synagogues. The Catholic Church since the time of Jerome (fourth century CE) and most Protestant Christian churches use this version as their source text for modern translations.

Old Greek (OG, or Septuagint)

The earliest translation of the Hebrew Bible is the Old Greek (OG), the translation made in Alexandria, Egypt, for the use of the Greek-speaking Jewish community there. At first, just the **Torah** (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) was translated, in the third century BCE; the rest of the biblical books were translated later. The whole Hebrew Bible was likely translated into ancient Greek by the middle of the second century BCE.

Scholars think that many OG translators worked from early Hebrew versions of biblical books that were quite different than those versions that became the

Masoretic Text (MT). As a result, some biblical books, such as Daniel, Jeremiah, and Job, are longer or shorter in the OG version of the Bible than they are in the MT.

At the time of the Old Greek translation, there was no Masoretic Text, nor any official or authorized “Bible” in existence. There were merely multiple editions of many scrolls of various perceived levels of sacredness. In fact, unlike the Masoretes, it seems that there wasn’t an official project to translate these sacred texts into ancient Greek; instead, many different Greek-speaking Jews in various times and places simply translated their favorite books into ancient Greek. Many centuries later, people began to choose the best of these Greek translations and to copy them together as one book.

Eventually, early Christians adapted and adopted the OG translation as their preferred version of the Hebrew Bible and it was used (and still is used by Eastern Orthodox Churches) in early Christian liturgy. Most Jews in Greek-speaking lands returned to using the Hebrew version that would later become the Masoretic Text.

Aramaic

Many different Jewish scribes at different moments in time translated the various books of the Hebrew Bible into Aramaic. As the Jews in Palestine spoke mostly Aramaic by the time the biblical books were coming into their final forms, translations were required even while the finishing touches were being put on the original Hebrew texts. For example, a complete translation of the Torah into Aramaic is called Targum Onkelos, and some parts of it probably go back as far as 100 BCE. Others, such as Targum Psalms, date from as late as 600 CE. These Aramaic translations are usually called “Targums,” since *targum* is the Aramaic word for “translation.” Some of these translations are more literal, and others are more expansive and creative. Some biblical books have a number of different Targums made from them, while for others we can only find one.

Syriac

The Syriac language was spoken by Jews in northern Syria, who, in order to understand their biblical traditions, translated their Bible into Syriac at various points in the second century CE. At least several translators worked on this project, so the quality and style of translation varies. The Peshitta (which means “simple,” that is, a plain translation without textual comments) was prepared for the use of Jews and later taken over by Syriac-speaking Christians, who added a Syriac version of the New Testament to it, although the far-Eastern Christian churches seemed to not include several New Testament letters as well as the book of Revelation. In modern Syria, Iraq, Iran, and other areas around the Middle East (and even in parts of India), the Syriac translation called the Peshitta continues to be in use.

In the second century CE, a Christian named Tatian decided to **harmonize** (to combine similar elements into one) all four canonical Greek Gospels and, at the

same time, translate them into Syriac. Since the four Gospels seem to exhibit some discrepancies, Tatian rewrote them so that they would not be in conflict with one another. While Tatian's harmony was very popular in the East until the fifth century CE, other early Christian **exegetes** (interpreters) such as Irenaeus urged Christians to maintain all four canonical Gospels. The tradition of four separate Gospels continues in almost all Christian churches to this day.

The New Testament

The early Christian community wrote much about its history, beliefs, and traditions, which arose alongside those of ancient Judaism. As Greek was a common second language for many of the people within the Roman Empire, most early Christian literature was written in Greek.

The four canonical gospels were presumably written in different places by different authors, and are notoriously difficult to date. But we do know that the Pauline letters were written somewhere between 50 CE and 60 CE. Paul's letters are the earliest surviving examples of early Christian literature. The four canonical gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) were likely written and edited between 65 and 100 CE, but they seem to be based on earlier sources, either written or oral.

By the early second century CE, various Greek-language gospels, narratives, letters, and apocalyptic writings were being used by Christian communities. Public readings of these texts and of the Hebrew Bible during Christian worship probably began the process of canonization of Christian writings.

Official lists of books in or out of the canon only begin to appear in the fourth century CE. However, Christian canon lists remained quite fluid through the seventh century; during this time, books such as *Shepherd of Hermas* or the forged *Epistle to the Laodiceans* could be found in certain Christian Bibles.

But overall, by the end of the fourth century there was general agreement about which books should have scriptural status. For a work to be considered sacred in the fourth century and beyond, it had to claim **apostolic authority**: that is, the work had to be written by or authorized by one of the earliest Christian leaders, especially Paul and the twelve apostles. Furthermore, apostolic authority required that the books be consistent with the teachings about Jesus and the Trinity that were found in other accepted books and that were current in fourth-century Christianity. As a result, books such as the *Gospel of Peter* were rejected from most Christian canon lists, and some writings deemed non-canonical were lost, and only rediscovered in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The early Christian community held the written word in high esteem and also sought to preach their message as widely as possible; this led to a desire to translate the Christian literature, including the books of the New Testament, into many different languages, relatively soon after they were written. By the third century CE,

translations were available in Latin (the Old Latin version), Syriac (the Peshitta version), and Coptic (an ancient Egyptian language in use in Egypt until the seventeenth century). Soon afterward, translations were available in Armenian (early fifth century), Ethiopic (mid-fourth century), and Slavonic (ninth century).

Starting in the early Middle Ages, translations of portions of the Christian Bible into Old English, French, German, and various other European languages began to appear. Today, parts of the Bible have been translated into over 2,400 languages.

GLOSSARY

Apostolic authority, the process by which a text is determined to be sacred and authoritative in the religious sense because of a perceived direct relationship between the twelve apostles, Paul, early Christian leaders and the text.

Aramaic, the language of Jews living in ancient Palestine from the post-exilic period through first centuries CE (5th century BCE – 4th century CE).

BCE/CE, abbreviations for “Before the Common Era” and the “Common Era.” The common scholarly terms used for BC and AD.

Canon, a list of books that are considered Scripture (or core literature) for any particular group of people.

Canonization, the process of deciding which books or literature are to be included in a canon, and which are to be excluded.

Codex, sheets of papyrus, vellum or parchment stitched together and bound in leather, resembling a modern-day printed book.

Exegetes, those who practice critical explanation or interpretation of the Bible.

Harmonize, to combine similar parts from different texts into a whole, while excluding contradictory elements of those same texts.

Masorettes, a group of Jewish scribes from the 7th to 11th centuries CE who edited texts of the Hebrew Bible, while adding vowels and cantillation marks (musical notation and stresses) in order to unify interpretation and clarify meaning of individual words.

Papyrus, Scribe and Scroll, see Harper Collins entry.

Syriac, the language spoken by Jews and Christians living in northern Syria from the 4th to 8th centuries CE.

Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy.

Translation, the process of taking a word in one language, and finding its equivalent in meaning in the word of another language.

Vocalization, adding vowels to a text made up solely of consonants.