

Knowing *the* Bible 101

Bruce BICKEL
&
Stan JANTZ



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KNOWING THE BIBLE 101

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Chapter 1

Millions of people today are searching for a reliable voice of authority. The Word of God is the only real authority we have. His Word sheds light on human nature, world problems, and human suffering. But beyond that, it clearly reveals the way to God.

The message of the Bible is the message of Jesus Christ who said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). It is the story of salvation; the story of your redemption and mine through Christ; the story of life, of peace, of eternity.

Our faith is not dependent upon human knowledge and scientific advance, but upon the unmistakable message of the Word of God.

Billy Graham

Someone may tell you the Bible is the most amazing book ever written, but discovering that for yourself is quite another thing. In this section, we are going to give you reasons why the Bible is both amazing and important—and we're going to show you why you can trust the Bible completely. This is crucial because as you read the Bible for yourself, you're going to eventually ask a very big question: Is this stuff really true? And whether your answer is yes, no, or maybe, another even bigger question will follow right behind: What does it mean for me?

The Bible: *Anatomy of the World's Bestseller*

What's Ahead

- What Makes the Bible So Popular?
- How Do We Know the Bible Is the Word of God?
- Why God Chose Words Over Angels
- Here's How God Did It
- It's Greek to Me (But for a Reason)
- From Stone Tablets to the Internet
- Can Translations Be Trusted?
- Bible Warriors

*Y*ou've seen it around for as long as you can remember. That black book with the word "holy" on the cover, the one people swear on when they are asked to tell the truth, the book TV preachers hold up and wave around.

It's the Bible, of course. You probably have a Bible somewhere close by. Maybe you've read parts of it, but you can't remember the last time you opened it. Was it at confirmation class? Was it in that hotel room? And didn't it have all of those "thees" and "thous" in it? And really, how can such an old book be relevant to you now?

How do you feel about the Bible? Are you curious? Intimidated? Since you're reading this book, we'll take a shot and say you're at least *interested* and want to know more. You may even be eager to learn just exactly what the Bible has in store for you.

Where you are coming from doesn't really matter. What counts is where you're going. The fact that you have chosen to read a book about the greatest book ever indicates that you care about your life: how you got here, where you're going, and how you live your life every day in between.

We think that when you finish this book, and (more importantly) when you begin to read the Bible for yourself, you're going to be a different person. And you're going to discover that the Bible will put you in touch with God Himself.

Why I'm Interested in the Bible

Now would be a great time to list your reasons for reading the Bible (might as well be stunningly honest).

You're not alone in your search to find out more about the Bible. The fact of the matter is that the Bible is the bestselling book in the world! No one knows how many people throughout history have actually read the Bible or a portion of the Bible, but we do know that since the invention of the printing press in 1455, more than *6 billion* copies of the Bible have been printed in more than 2000 languages. That means that billions of people in every corner of the world have read at least a portion of the Bible. The Bible has no rival when it comes to popularity.

What Makes the Bible So Popular?

Reading the Bible is unlike any other reading experience. In fact, the Bible is many kinds of books in one:

The Bible is a great story. It's the story of God and man from Creation to the end of the world. The Bible contains hundreds of unforgettable dramas involving nations, families, and individuals. And think of all those Sunday school stories about giants and whales and lovers and dead men rising from the grave....

The Bible is a great literary achievement. The Bible is considered the greatest piece of literature ever written. The Bible contains virtually every type of literary style: drama, historical narrative, instruction, even poetry. The plots, characters, and settings are timeless. The quality of writing is unparalleled.

The Bible is a great history book. The Bible has been proven to be totally accurate in its portrayal of historical events. No other book of antiquity has survived to the present with such integrity.

The Bible is a great book of prophecy. No other book even comes close to predicting the future in such detail and with such amazing accuracy.

The Bible is a great holy book. More than any other holy book in the world, the Bible is read by people looking for spiritual answers to their deepest questions.

Yes, the Bible contains all of these kinds of reading experiences—and more. But this is not why the Bible is read by millions of people every day. For a bigger, more important reason, the Bible is unlike any other book ever written.

The Bible Is God's Message

Here's why the Bible is so unique: *The Bible is God's revelation of Himself to people.* Theologians use a term called "divine revelation." This refers to the fact that God, who is *divine*, has *revealed* Himself to us in various ways, most directly through the Bible, which historically has been accepted by the church as the "final authority." The reason you and millions of other people want to

read the Bible is because you believe it is—or might be—God's message for you.

The Bible is often called the “Good Book,” and indeed it is. But the Bible is much more than a book, and it is much more than good. Here's the deal: The Bible contains the very words of God. You don't have to *wonder* about God. You can *know* about God because He has left you a message. In fact, when you read the Bible, God is talking to you.

You accepted what we said as the very word of God—which, of course, it was. And this word continues to work in you who believe (1 Thessalonians 2:13).

More than just a collection of books with hard-to-pronounce names, the Bible is God's personal message to you, someone He loves very much.

How Do We Know the Bible Is the Word of God?

Good question! Because the Bible is the written Word of God, we need to know that the Bible—which we are calling God's message—has been accurately written down and copied from the ancient days to today. We don't want to guess and hope that it was correctly duplicated through the ages.

Josh McDowell, noted Bible teacher, says that only God could have created a book that

- has been transmitted accurately from the time it was originally written
- is correct when it deals with historical people and events
- contains no “scientific absurdities”
- remains true and relevant to all people for all time.

Hang on during the next few pages. Some of this stuff could get a little detailed, but you need to know why the Bible you use really is the Word of God. You will have confidence as you read the Bible, and you will also have an answer for those who doubt the authority and authenticity of the Bible.

The Bible is alive, it speaks to me; it has feet, it runs after me; it has hands, it lays hold of me.

Martin Luther, sixteenth-century reformer

Why God Chose Words Over Angels

Think about this: God can communicate to the world in any way He wants. He could send an angel to everybody with a long announcement. Or interrupt your favorite TV show with an important message. Or program His message about life's meaning into your genes. Or arrange things so that if you sit cross-legged while eating Thai noodles, you would suddenly understand everything.

But despite all His options, He has chosen *written* communication as the primary means to deliver His message about the meaning of life.

God chose the written word for a simple reason: For reliability, you can't beat it. You know the drill: If you verbally tell something to someone, and that person tells someone else, you can be sure that the message will change. And the more your original message is passed from one person to another, the more it will change dramatically.

But when you write your message down and give it to someone else, you leave no question as to what you said. The *meaning* of your words may be open to interpretation (more on that

What's in a Word?

According to the dictionary, the word *word* can have several different meanings:

- *Word*—a sound that has meaning
- *Word*—a promise (as in "I give you my word")
- *Word*—the Bible, the message of the gospel
- *Word*—Jesus Christ, the *logos*, the Son of God

in chapter 2), but the *words* remain intact. That's why we still use the written word for legal contracts even though we could use much more advanced technology to record our words.

Here's How God Did It

We're going to tell you how your Bible went from God to you. This is an amazing question to ponder. Just how does God, who is a Spirit (that is, not of flesh and blood), put His words into a format that we flesh-and-blood humans can read and understand?

One of the foremost authorities on the Bible is Dr. Norman Geisler. In his textbook *A General Introduction to the Bible*, Dr. Geisler says when it comes to the Bible, there are three links in the chain from God to us: *inspiration*, *canonization*, and *transmission*. Studying each of these will give you greater confidence as you read your Bible.

Link #1—*Inspiration: God-Breathed Words*

The first link in the chain “from God to us” is *inspiration*. In chapter 3 we'll talk more about the role the Holy Spirit plays in

So What Do We Call It Anyway?

The word *Bible* never appears in the Bible. The word comes from the Latin word *biblia*, which means “book.” Jesus often referred to the *Scriptures*. Here are some other words used to describe the Bible from Psalm 119:

The <i>law</i> of the Lord	(verse 1)
His <i>decrees</i>	(verse 2)
His <i>commandments</i>	(verse 4)
His <i>principles</i>	(verses 5 and 23)
His <i>commands</i>	(verse 47)
His <i>word</i>	(verse 105)
His <i>promises</i>	(verse 140)

helping us to *understand* God's Word. This is a present and ongoing benefit provided by the third Person in the Godhead.

In the past, however, the Holy Spirit did something critically important that made the Bible possible. God used the Holy Spirit to *inspire* 40 different writers over a period of 1500 years to write down His words.

When we get inspired, we get motivated. But in the literal sense of the word, *inspire* means "to breathe or blow into." Webster's dictionary defines *inspiration* as "a divine influence." This is also the meaning of the Greek word that is translated *inspire*. Inspiration describes the process by which God gave His message to human authors who received it and wrote it down.

All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It straightens us out and teaches us to do what is right (2 Timothy 3:16).

Because of this process, you can trust the Bible completely. God, who is perfect, used a foolproof means to get His message into print. He "breathed in" what He wanted. Nothing more, nothing less.

God's breath gives life. When God breathed into the human authors, He gave *life* to His Word. God also gave life to man when He created him. The Bible says that when God formed Adam's body from the dust of the ground, He "breathed into it the breath of life." Dr. R.C. Sproul, one of our favorite Bible scholars, writes in his book *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith* that

the Holy Spirit guided the human authors so that their words would be nothing less than the word of God. How God superintended the original writings of the Bible is not known. But inspiration does not mean that God dictated his messages to those who wrote the Bible. Rather, the Holy Spirit communicated through the human writers the very words of God.

The result was that the personalities of the authors came through without changing God's message one bit.

Link #2—*Canonicity: the Words Measured Up*

The second link in the chain “from God to us” is *canonicity*, which is the process by which church leaders recognized individual books of the Bible as being inspired by God. The *canon* describes which books make up the Bible we use today. The word comes from the root word *reed*, which was used as a measuring stick in ancient times.

Old and Scrolled

Keep in mind that Bible translators work from the most reliable (which usually means the oldest) manuscripts of the original Bible languages available. The oldest and most trusted Bible manuscripts, called the Dead Sea Scrolls, were not uncovered until 1947. Most Bible translations since then have been based on these remarkable Bible manuscripts.

When applied to Scripture, *canon* indicates the measure or the standard used to evaluate which books were *inspired* and which ones weren't. In the first centuries after Christ, several church councils met to determine which books should be included in the canon. Their main task was to evaluate books written during and after the time of Christ (the Old Testament canon had already been determined). The councils followed strict guidelines to determine which books qualified as Scripture. Dr. Geisler lists five checkpoints they used:

1. Does it speak with God's authority?
2. Is it written by a man of God speaking to us as a prophet of God?
3. Does it have the authentic stamp of God?
4. Does it impact us with the power of God?
5. Was it accepted by the people of God?

Infallibility and Inerrancy

When we say that the Bible is *infallible* or *inerrant*, we mean that it is completely true. This is because God, who is the Author, is incapable of error. Dr. Sproul says that “this does not mean that the Bible translations we have today are without error, but that the original manuscripts were absolutely correct.”

A key point to remember is that the canon councils did not *declare* a book to be from God. They simply *recognized* the divine authority that was already there.

Link #3—Transmission: Writer’s Cramp and Beyond

Transmission is the third link in the chain “from God to us.” This describes the total process of transmitting the Bible from the early writers to us today using the most practical and reliable materials available at the time.

The total *canon* of Scripture—that is, all 66 books of the Bible—was recognized as the authoritative Word of God by the fourth century A.D. After that time, the Bible had to be preserved for the future.

What About the Apocrypha?

Some Bibles—most notably the *New Jerusalem Bible*—include a section of books between the Old and New Testaments called the Apocrypha. The name itself means “hidden” or “noncanonical.” Although these books have historical value, the early church fathers decided that they were not inspired. More than a thousand years later (in 1546 at the Council of Trent), the Roman Catholic Church declared the following apocryphal books to be canonical: Tobit, Judith, the Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, and I and II Maccabees.

Details, Details...

From earliest times, Jewish scribes had to follow detailed procedures for copying Scripture. These rules helped to ensure total concentration and accuracy. Their meticulous approach set the standard for monks and other scholars who have transcribed the Bible through the ages. Of scores of rules for scribes listed by Jewish scholar Samuel Davidson, here are three:

1. No word or letter or any other mark may be written from memory. The scribe must look directly at the original scroll for every stroke.
 2. Between every letter, the space of a hair or thread must intervene.
 3. Should a king address him while writing the name of God, the scribe must take no notice of him until finished.
-

According to Geisler, “The Scriptures had to be copied, translated, recopied, and retranslated. This process not only provided the Scriptures for other nations, but for other generations as well.”

The accuracy of these copies is critical to the Bibles we currently use. Today, when someone asks you to copy a document, you simply stick it into a photocopier. No big deal. Before copiers, however, documents had to be printed on presses, and before the printing press, documents had to be copied by hand. In His providence, God chose to preserve His Word objectively through *language*.

It's Greek to Me (But for a Reason)

The two major original languages of the Bible are Hebrew (Old Testament) and Greek (New Testament). God did not choose these languages at random, but rather for specific purposes that helped transmit the Bible accurately from ancient times to today.

We take language for granted, but without it we would be hard-pressed to explain something to another person or group of people. Just try explaining the game of football to someone using only hand gestures. Language enables us to explain concepts and ideas—both real and imagined—to others. In His wisdom, God first

A Scholar Speaks Out

Some scholars are reluctant to recognize the accuracy and reliability of the Bible manuscripts because doing so means that you have to recognize the authority of God as well. Not Dr. Clark Pinnock. Here's what he wrote about the Bible:

There exists no document from the ancient world witnessed by so excellent a set of textual and historical testimonies and offering so superb an array of historical data on which an intelligent decision may be made. An honest [person] cannot dismiss a source of this kind. Skepticism regarding the historical credentials of Christianity is based upon irrational bias.

enabled people to use language, and then He picked the best languages possible for communicating His message to us.

Hebrew

Language experts agree that Hebrew, the principal language of the Old Testament and of the Jewish (or Hebrew) people, is a *precise, pictorial, and personal* language. Bible scholar F. F. Bruce wrote that Hebrew is “the right sort of language for the record of the self-revelation of a God who does not make Himself known by philosophical propositions but by controlling and intervening in the course of human history.”

In other words, Hebrew perfectly describes a God who is very much involved in the lives of people, especially the Hebrew people. As Geisler says, it was the ideal *biographical* language.

Greek

Greek is the primary language of the New Testament, and again, God chose Greek for a reason. For one thing, it was the language spoken by most of the world at the time of Christ. This meant that the Scriptures that were distributed to the known

world after Jesus left the earth could be read by most people. Greek was the ideal language for the transmission of the gospel.

Furthermore, as Geisler says, Greek was an *intellectual* language that was perfect for the expression of the “propositional truth” of the New Testament.

You don't have to read the New Testament very long to realize that the Christian faith is a rational and reasonable faith. Greek is a language of reason. Maybe we should not be surprised that the three greatest philosophers of history—Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates—were all Greek.

*M*ore than 6500 languages are spoken in the world. The Bible has been translated into approximately 2400 of them.

From Stone Tablets to the Internet

Just as the two major languages of the Bible were important to its accuracy and reliability, the *materials* on which the words were recorded had to be reliable as well. Here is a list of different materials used to record the Word of God throughout history.

Clay. Used as early as 3500 B.C., clay was practical because the material could be inscribed with a *stylus* while it was still soft.

Stone. The biblical writers *chiseled* the words onto stone tablets. This stuff is pretty permanent, which is probably why God asked Moses to use it to record His law (Exodus 24:12). That was also the first portion of Scripture to go into a second printing (Exodus 32:19; 34:1).

Papyrus. This material was big in Egypt as early as 3100 B.C. Papyrus is a plant with fibers that can be pressed together to create a writing surface.

Vellum, parchment, leather. Various animal skins were popular forms of writing materials (although not as popular with the animals).

Paper. The Chinese invented paper in the second century A.D.

Computer Technology. In the twentieth century new materials have been developed which record and transmit God's Word in practical new ways, including computer discs, satellites, and the Internet.

Wax-Its

During the time of Esther (479 B.C.), scribes and court officials used writing boards covered with a thin coat of wax as quick, reusable "scratch paper."

Can Translations Be Trusted?

God has carefully planned the preservation of His Word through the ages so that the Bible you have today can be trusted completely. But the Bible was originally written in Hebrew and Greek. What about all of the Bible translations in other languages? What about the English translations we read? Are they reliable? Are they accurate? Can you trust them to be the Word of God?

How Did It Happen?

The first book known to be translated into another language was the Old Testament. In the third or second century B.C., the Hebrew Old Testament was translated into Greek. This version was known as the *Septuagint*, and it stayed popular with Jews and Christians alike well into the second century A.D.

In the middle of the third century, however, Latin replaced Greek as the common language. This occurred primarily because the church, the highest authority in the world, was headquartered in Rome. In 405, Jerome finished a translation of the entire Bible into Latin called the Vulgate (which means "Common"). A thousand years or so later, some great men of God took on the daunting task of translating the Bible into English.

The problem was that the Vulgate had become so popular and so identified with the church in Rome that the idea of the Bible

being in any other language than Latin was considered blasphemy. With all of the English translations available to us today, we can hardly imagine that owning an English Bible—let alone translating one—was once considered an offense punishable by death. But it's true. Hundreds of men and women gave their lives so that today we can read the Bible in English.

Backup Copies

Copies of ancient Bible documents, called *manuscripts*, are so abundant and so accurate that scholars universally agree the Bible is beyond question a historically accurate document. More than 5000 Greek manuscript portions of the New Testament exist.

Bible Warriors

Here are just a few of the Bible warriors who sacrificed to give us an English Bible we can read and understand:

John Wycliffe. A scholar who taught at Oxford in England, Wycliffe provided the first complete English Bible from the Latin Vulgate in 1384. Wycliffe died of natural causes, but many of his followers, called Lollards, were persecuted and killed for possessing and believing in Wycliffe's Bible.

Martin Luther. The father of the Reformation, Martin Luther translated the Bible into German while in prison in 1522.

William Tyndale. A brilliant man educated at Oxford and Cambridge, Tyndale devoted his life to translating the Bible from the original languages into the language of the common man. His Bible, finished in 1530, had copies burned by the thousands by the king of England, and Tyndale himself was burned at the stake in 1536.

John Knox and Miles Coverdale. In 1560, Knox, a Scotsman, and Coverdale, an Englishman, produced the Geneva Bible. Also known as the "Puritan Bible," this is the Bible the Pilgrims brought to America on the Mayflower in 1620. (This Bible popu-

*I*f God spare my life, I will cause a boy that driveth the plough to know more of the Scripture than thou dost.

William Tyndale, speaking to an official of the church

larly was called the “Breeches Bible” because of the way Genesis 3:7 was translated: “They sewed figleaves together, and made themselves breeches.”)

King James. By the time James I became the king of England, the English Bible had become so accepted that the king himself appointed a committee of 47 English Bible scholars to produce an “Authorized Version” of the Bible. First published in 1611, this version became commonly known as the “King James Version.”

Ken Taylor. Many modern-language translations have been produced in this century, but none have matched the popularity of *The*

The Gutenberg Millennium

As recently as the fifteenth century, reproducing one copy of the Bible by hand took ten months. A single copy cost more than the average person made in a *lifetime*. All that changed when Johannes Gutenberg designed and built the first Western printing press that worked in Mainz, Germany, in 1455. The first book he printed was a copy of the Bible. Within 50 years, hundreds of Gutenberg presses produced hundreds of thousands of Bibles all over Europe. So powerful was the effect of the printing press on the world that *Life* magazine called this single achievement the most significant event of the last thousand years. On October 22, 1987, a copy of the Old Testament containing Genesis through Psalms, printed in 1455, was sold at Christie's Auction House in New York City for 5.39 million dollars.

Living Bible. Ken Taylor's greatest desire was for his children to understand the Bible, so he single-handedly took on the task of paraphrasing the Bible in a version he called *The Living Bible*. Since it was completed in 1971, more than 40 million copies have been sold.

What These Warriors Fought For

Over the centuries, many people have made great sacrifices to make the Bible available to you. But in the end, what matters more than *having* a Bible is *reading* the Bible. Remember, God has placed an incredibly high value on His Word, both written and living. The Bible tells us that God has exalted Jesus—the living Word—for all eternity (Philippians 2:9-11). The written Word of God has also been preserved for all eternity.

The grass withers, and the flowers fade, but the word of our God stands forever (Isaiah 40:8).

Ever since God inspired human agents to write down His words, He has acted meticulously and miraculously to make sure that we can

- read it
- understand it
- live it

The Bible is God's message for you. And you can trust it completely.

*B*illions Served

In what was perhaps the greatest broadcast of a Scripture text in history, British Prime Minister Tony Blair read 1 Corinthians 13, one of the most famous passages in the Bible, at the funeral of Princess Diana of Wales. The estimated viewing audience was 2 billion people.

What's That Again?

1. God has chosen written communication as the primary means of delivering His message to us.
2. Inspiration, canonization, and transmission are the three links in the chain from God to us.
3. God has been meticulous in preserving His Word through human language and materials.
4. Thousands of people have sacrificed their lives so that we can have a readable, trustworthy English Bible.

Dig Deeper

Here are some other resources that you might want to read if you are interested in the composition of the Bible:

A General Introduction to the Bible by Norman Geisler and William Nix. In our view, the best and most complete book on the origin and transmission of the Bible.

What the Bible Is All About by Henrietta Mears. Here is the bestselling book about the Bible (more than 4 million sold) ever written. The reason is that it's personal and readable.

A Ready Defense by Josh McDowell. The first section of this book offers a well-documented presentation on the Bible and its reliability.

The Complete Guide to Bible Versions by Philip W. Comfort. A handy (and inexpensive) guide to the major translations and versions of the Bible.

Truth and Power by J. I. Packer. Dr. Packer looks at the authority of the Bible. If you want to learn how to use, rather than abuse, your Bible, read this book.



Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. If you have avoided reading the Bible until now, explain why. What led to your current interest in the Bible?
 2. What might Josh McDowell have meant when he said the Bible contains no “scientific absurdities”?
 3. Role play for a moment. Imagine the Bible is on trial, and you have been called to testify. Answer this question: How do you know the Bible is God’s Word?
 4. What is your favorite Bible story? If you are reading this book in a group study, be prepared to tell the story aloud to the others in your group. If you’re going through this book on your own, tell your story to a friend or someone in your family.
 5. Review the five strict guidelines that the church councils used to determine which books qualified as Scripture. Describe how each of these impacts you personally as you read the Bible.
 6. Did you know that people were actually killed for translating the Bible so others could better understand it? How does that fact affect you as you read your own favorite Bible translation?
 7. Read 2 Timothy 3:16 and Hebrews 4:12. What are your top three reasons for reading the Bible regularly?
-



Moving On...

Congratulations! You've made it through the most technical (and probably most detailed) chapter in our book. Why was all this stuff important? As you read your Bible, we want you to *know* (rather than *feel*) that you can trust your Bible completely. You can have confidence that the Bible isn't something people created out of their imaginations. It is the authoritative Word of God.

Now we're going to talk about the benefits of reading and studying the Bible. We're also going to show you how easily you can *twist* Scripture into something it's not, and how you can unknowingly follow someone who's done that. Ultimately, *your* responsibility is to know the truth of the Bible. But you're not alone. You have the *resources* you need, you can find other *people* to help you, and you have the *Holy Spirit* to guide you. So move on! This story gets better and better.