

How We Got the Bible

A Discussion Guide for Digging Deeper

by Keith Stanglin

Lesson 1. How Does God Reveal Himself?

How we got the Bible is a big topic that encompasses many different possible approaches to the question. This first episode considers the Bible as one aspect of God's special revelation to humanity.

Discussion Questions:

1. Tell about the first Bible you remember owning. How did you get it? Was it a gift from someone? Do you have a favorite Bible?
2. List and discuss all the things a person could know about God via general revelation—that is, apart from having ever heard of the Bible.
3. How does Scripture fill in that picture of God? What does Scripture add to general revelation?
4. When you consider how we got the Bible, what questions do you bring to this topic? What do you hope to learn more about?

Lesson 2. What Is Inspiration?

How did we get the Bible? It came from God. But in what sense, and what do we mean by divine inspiration? This episode explores different views of inspiration, considers various testimonies in Scripture, and offers a way to think about its full divinity and humanity.

Discussion Questions:

1. How have you typically thought about inspiration or how inspiration works? Has anything in this episode challenged or nuanced your thinking?
2. Read Isaiah 6. Now compare that passage with 1 Cor. 1:14-16; 2 Cor. 11:16-21; 2 Tim. 4:9-13. Do you notice a difference between the inspiration of Isaiah 6 and the inspiration of any of these NT selections (in process, claims, immediacy, tone, etc.)?
3. Read Luke 1:1-4. What process is Luke describing? How did he acquire the information he needed to compose his Gospel? How do you believe God worked in this process?
4. What's the difference in thinking about inspiration ontologically versus functionally? What is Scripture "useful for"? What is it *not* useful for?

5. Can you think of evidences that corroborate the doctrine of inspiration, that show it's not irrational to believe Scripture is inspired? Would you agree that these fall short of proof, and what are the implications, either way?

6. How can the Christological analogy help us think about the nature of Scripture and our expectations of it?

Lesson 3. How Were these Books Composed?

How did we get the Bible? In addition to the divine aspect, there were many human processes at work. To begin with, human writers had specific reasons to put down in writing what they witnessed or knew. After composition, the final form of those writings were then copied and distributed to others.

Discussion Questions:

1. How does knowing the purpose of a book in the Bible help us understand that book and its origin?
2. What do you think about previous editions or forms of biblical books existing before the final form or compilation came together?

Lesson 4. Where Did the Concept of a “Bible” Come from?

How did we get the Bible? Jews and Christians recognized the authoritative and timeless nature of certain sacred books and regarded them as more significant than other books. They formed a canon of Scripture and drew boundaries around their collection. This episode explores how Jews and later Christians became a “people of the book.”

Discussion Questions:

1. How do you think an oral community of faith became people of the book? What are some factors that you think might have contributed to this move?
2. Most traditions and disciplines have a “canon,” old compositions that set the standard. What are some examples of the canon (that is, canonical works) in music? Art? Other religions? Philosophy? Literature? Other areas? Your field of expertise or work?
3. How did such works become part of their respective canon?
4. What are the similarities and differences between those (secular) canons (set pieces) and the biblical canon?

5. Read the excerpts from early Christian writers provided in the attachment for this lesson (Canon: Some Primary Sources). What observations do you have about these passages? Does anything surprise you or strike you as interesting?

Lesson 5. Which Books Belong in the Bible?

How did we get the Bible? The early church included in its canon documents written by the apostles and their companions, proclaimed apostolic doctrine, and were known and used in apostolic churches. Those that didn't meet the criteria were excluded.

Discussion Questions:

1. What do you imagine it would be like not to know which books are authoritative for your faith and practice?
2. What were the criteria for evaluating the written canon of Scripture?
3. How was the idea of "inspiration" used in the early church?
4. What have you heard in the media or popular culture about the development of the canon or of excluded books? How did this episode clarify matters?
5. Do you think the boundaries of the canon should be reopened today? Why or why not?

Lesson 6. How Were the Biblical Texts Passed Down?

How did we get the Bible? Scribes painstakingly copied biblical manuscripts, using the best technologies of their time, and they made sure the words were preserved for far-off peoples and future generations to treasure.

Discussion Questions:

1. In what ways do we take books for granted today? In general, what are the advantages and disadvantages of books in comparison with other modes of communication?
2. Do you read the Bible more from a book or on a screen? Do you notice any differences between these media in the way you engage the words of Scripture?
3. See Neil Lightfoot's lecture, at <https://youtu.be/4rj4D5s5p2U>. It is a summary of his book, *How We Got the Bible*, dealing mostly with the question of how the texts were passed down, but also briefly with questions about canon, textual criticism, and translation. What did you learn that was surprising or that you want to be sure and remember?

Lesson 7. Is the Biblical Text Reliable?

How did we get the Bible? Scholars have collected and collated thousands of manuscripts to present a text of Scripture that reconstructs the original readings as accurately as possible. Their findings are published and these texts are printed in Hebrew and Greek Bibles for readers and translators today.

Discussion Questions:

1. Have you ever noticed text critical footnotes in your Bible translation? What have you thought about those? Were they puzzling or troubling? How has this video helped clarify what's going on?
2. How should we characterize the manuscript evidence of the New Testament in comparison with other documents from antiquity? What does this say about the reliability of the NT text as an accurate reflection of the autographs?
3. What are the typical errors that you might make when copying a document by hand? What about when listening to someone dictating?
4. If someone said to you that, "since we don't have the original autographs of Paul's letters (or other biblical documents), then we cannot be sure that what we have reflects those letters," how would you respond?

Lesson 8. Are Translations Reliable?

How did we get the Bible? Scholars have taken the best text (provided by text critics) and translated the biblical documents in a way that balances accuracy with understandability. Modern readers have faithful (though not perfect) translations, and comparing multiple translations aids in grasping the range of meaning.

Discussion Questions:

1. What do you think makes a good translation? What should you look for when choosing a translation?
2. What agendas, if any, do you think a scholarly translation might have and that you may want to watch for?
3. Have you ever noticed what seemed like a strange translation of a verse or phrase? What do you think is going on?
4. Do you have a favorite Bible translation? What do you like about it?

5. Looking back on this entire series on how we got the Bible, what has struck you as interesting or illuminating? What do you want to take with you and remember?

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For Further Reading

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