VOLUME 1

OLD TESTAMENT

THE NEW COLLEGEVILLE BIBLE COMMENTARY

INTRODUCTION TO THE BIBLE

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ABBREVIATIONS

Books of the Bible

Acts—Acts of the Apostles
Amos—Amos
Bar—Baruch
1 Chr—1 Chronicles
2 Chr—2 Chronicles
Col—Colossians
1 Cor—1 Corinthians
2 Cor—2 Corinthians
Dan—Daniel
Deut—Deuteronomy
Eccl (or Qoh)—Ecclesiastes
Eph—Ephesians
Esth—Esther
Exod—Exodus
Ezek—Ezekiel
Ezra—Ezra
Gal—Galatians
Gen—Genesis
Hab—Habakkuk
Hag—Haggai
Heb—Hebrews
Hos—Hosea
Isa—Isaiah
Jas—James
Jdt—Judith
Jer—Jeremiah
Job—Job
Joel—Joel
John—John
1 John—1 John
2 John—2 John
3 John—3 John
Jonah—Jonah
Josh—Joshua
Jude—Jude
Judg—Judges
1 Kgs—1 Kings
2 Kgs—2 Kings
Lam—Lamentations
Lev—Leviticus
Luke—Luke
1 Macc—1 Maccabees
2 Macc—2 Maccabees
Mal—Malachi
Mark—Mark
Matt—Matthew
Mic—Micah
Nah—Nahum
Neh—Nehemiah
Num—Numbers
Obad—Obadiah
1 Pet—1 Peter
2 Pet—2 Peter
Phil—Philippians
Phlm—Philemon
Prov—Proverbs
Ps(s)—Psalms
Rev—Revelation
Rom—Romans
Ruth—Ruth
1 Sam—1 Samuel
2 Sam—2 Samuel
Sir—Sirach
Song—Song of Songs
1 Thess—1 Thessalonians
2 Thess—2 Thessalonians
1 Tim—1 Timothy
2 Tim—2 Timothy
Titus—Titus
Tob—Tobit
Wis—Wisdom
Zech—Zechariah
Zeph—Zephaniah

INTRODUCTION

The book we know as the Bible is not so much a single book as a library. It is a collection of books, written by different authors, at different times, and dealing with a wide range of concerns. We recognize this fact when we refer to the Bible as "the Scriptures," a term that implies we are not dealing with one book but with many. Even our English word "Bible" was originally not a singular noun but a plural one, for it comes from the Greek term *ta biblia*, which means simply "the books." Only very late in its history did the corresponding Latin word *biblia* come to be treated as a singular noun.

Imagine that you were to walk into your local public library and pick up a book entirely at random off the shelves. As you opened the book, there would be a number of questions that would immediately spring to mind. First of all, you might ask yourself, "What sort of book is this? Is it a 'how-to' book, such as a car repair manual, or a work on home decorating? Is it a work of fiction, such as a novel? Is it a history book, telling what purports to be a true story of a person or place? Or is it a textbook, setting out the fundamental ideas of some field of study?"

If you were not able to answer these questions, you would hardly know what to do with the book you were holding. What use would it be to you? How could you begin to understand it? As you continued turning the pages, other questions might occur to you. You might ask, for instance, "Who wrote this book? When was it written? For what purpose was it written? How is it set out? Does it, for example, tell a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end?" These questions, too, would help you to understand the book better and to use it more intelligently.

Each volume in the New Collegeville Bible Commentary series will deal with one or more of the books that form the biblical library. In studying that book, it will ask precisely these questions. What sort of book is this? When was it written? By whom was it written and for what purpose? How does it organize its material and present its message? It is important to try to answer such questions if we are to read biblical books intelligently.

This volume, however, is intended as an introduction to the series as a whole. For this reason it is not devoted to any one of the biblical books; it is intended to be a guide to the library as a whole. What we will be looking at in the following pages is the history of this collection of writings and the ways in which it has been used. The questions we will be interested in are: Who founded this library? What books are found in it, and why were they selected? How has the collection developed over time? The following pages will also discuss how the library has been used over the long period of its history. What authority has been given to this particular collection of books and why? What instructions have been given for their interpretation during the long period that they have been regarded as Sacred Scripture?

In a word, this short work is intended to provide an initial orientation to the Bible for the general reader. It aims to help you read both the Bible itself and its commentaries with a sense of the contexts out of which they have come. It will therefore discuss all the matters traditionally dealt with in an introduction to the Bible. To use some technical terms, which we will come across later, it will deal with issues of the biblical text, the biblical canon, biblical authority, and biblical criticism. But rather than discussing these matters in the abstract, it will do so in a broadly historical context. It will examine the origin of the biblical writings and the ongoing story of their interpretation by reference to wider changes in the Christian community and in the society to which it belongs.

The focus of this short book will be on the Christian churches and—in more recent times—the Catholic Church. But it is important to realize that the Christians are not the only people for whom the Bible is Sacred Scripture. The first part of the Bible, which Christians call the Old Testament, is also Jewish Scripture, read and studied in the synagogue in the same way as the Christian Bible is read and studied in the churches. The Jewish Bible, otherwise known as the Hebrew Bible, is often referred to simply as *Tanak*, a word made up of the initial letters of the Hebrew names of its three principal parts: the *Torah* (Law), the *Nevi'im* (the Prophets), and the *Ketuvim* (the Writings).

Insofar as it deals with the origins of the Old Testament books, the present volume will also be dealing with the origins of *Tanak*. To the extent that both Jews and Christians make reference to these writings, they share a common set of Scriptures. But when it comes to the interpretation of these writings, the two traditions part company. Jews and Christians read and understand these common Scriptures very differently. The present work will deal only with the history of Christian biblical interpretation; it will not try to deal with the Jewish. It would take another book to do justice to

that topic, one written by an author with a more profound knowledge of Judaism. All I want to do here is to offer a warning. The attitudes towards the Bible described here are not the only attitudes that can be taken by people of faith. There is a parallel and very rich history of interpretation with which this introduction cannot deal.

In fact, there is a second history that this short work does not cover. This is the history of the use of the Bible outside the world of religious thought. It is the history of the Bible as a cultural artifact: its use by painters, musicians, poets, and playwrights and the role it has played in the development of our thinking on a range of issues, from politics to psychology. This would be a fascinating field of study, for—whatever one thinks of the Bible's message—it would be hard to overestimate its cultural significance.

One could study, for instance, the changing ways in which painters and sculptors have depicted biblical scenes or the ways in which poets have used biblical themes to add resonance to their works. One could trace the influence of biblical patterns of thought on thinkers as apparently irreligious as Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). Sadly, however, I cannot deal with this topic either. In fact, no one person could hope to do it justice. A proper treatment of the Bible's cultural significance would require a whole team of authors with expertise in these different fields of study.

Finally, there is a third history of the Bible that the present study will not be able to discuss. This is the history of how the Bible has actually been used within the Christian community but at the grassroots level (as it were), outside the relatively rarified world occupied by bishops and theologians. A history of this sort would look at the use of the Bible by popular preachers, by teachers in classrooms, and by leaders of church discussion groups.

It would also examine the ways in which individuals have used the Bible, irrespective of what their teachers may have taught them. For instance, there exists a long-standing custom of solving personal dilemmas by opening the Bible at random and seeking an answer in whatever verse comes to hand. While widely condemned by church authorities and theologians, the practice continues to be used in our own time. In previous ages, biblical verses have also been used in charms and amulets, to ward off the power of evil in ways that many would regard as magical.

A history of such unofficial practices would be an extraordinarily interesting one, but it also falls outside the scope of the present work. What we are interested in here is what has been said about the Bible by its officially sanctioned interpreters and by those who have sought to influence them. It is a history of what we might call the institutional interpretation of the Bible within the Christian churches.

The present work falls naturally into two parts. The first will concentrate on the origins of the Bible. It will offer a glimpse of the ways in which the people of Israel and then, in later centuries, the early Christians gathered this collection together and gave it the status of Sacred Scripture. This is the foundational section of the present study. After all, until there was an official collection of biblical writings, there was nothing for later Christians to interpret.

The second and larger part of our work will deal with the history of biblical interpretation. The survey found here will be divided into four periods. The first period is the longest, embracing both the age of those who are known as the church fathers and the Middle Ages. If we were to assign dates to this period, it would take us from about the year 200 to about the year 1500. Our second major period, that of the Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation, takes us from approximately the year 1500 to about 1650. This is a much shorter period, but it is one in which Western Christianity experienced revolutionary changes.

Our third period is the one I have described as the modern era. This may be said to begin with the scientific revolution of the mid-seventeenth century and continue through to our own time. However, we cannot stop there. Recent decades have witnessed a series of revolutions in scholarly attitudes to the Bible. These developments may conveniently be dealt with in a fourth and final section, under the heading of postmodern approaches to biblical interpretation.

While this represents a very broad overview of a very complex history, it may offer the general reader a helpful framework within which to begin to understand the Bible. In particular, it should enable you to appreciate the variety of ways in which the Christian Scriptures can be interpreted. It will also highlight the fact that these methods of biblical interpretation are not timeless. They did not fall from heaven as a user's guide to a divinely inspired collection of books. They represent attempts by devout but limited human beings to make sense of a set of writings they believed to be God's word for their time. However much the Bible may be thought to embody an eternal truth, its interpreters remain fallible human beings, bound by the limitations of their time and place.

THE ORIGINS OF THE BIBLE

The question with which this first section of our study deals seems simple enough: Where have these writings come from? But in dealing with this topic we are faced with almost insurmountable difficulties. Biblical scholars have spent more than two hundred years trying to trace the origins of the biblical writings, and yet this remains one of the most hotly debated topics in contemporary religious scholarship.

To make the present task more manageable, I will begin by making a distinction. I will distinguish between the material found in the Bible and the Bible in its present form as a collection of works from different times and places. Some of the material found in the Bible is probably very ancient, but the task of tracing its origin is best left to the authors of the individual commentaries in this series. All I can do here is try to trace the origin of the Bible in its present form. The question I will be trying to answer is: Where has this particular collection of books come from? I will begin by discussing the way in which Jews and Christians gradually assembled their sacred writings. I will describe how these Scriptures have been transmitted to us before glancing briefly at some major biblical translations.

THE BIBLICAL CANON

We may begin with what is generally described as the formation of the biblical canon. The word "canon" is derived from a Greek word meaning a rod or a rule, in the sense of a rod of fixed length that could be used for measurement. When used metaphorically, the same word indicated a fixed standard, a norm against which other things could be judged. The word could be used, for instance, of the models artists used to ensure correct proportions or of the models grammarians used to indicate correct speech. When such models were set out in the form of a table, the table as a whole could be described as a canon. At this point, the word had come to mean something like an authoritative series or list.

This is the sense in which Jews and Christians speak about the canon of the Bible. It is the list of biblical writings that is considered to carry authority within the synagogue and the churches. It is interesting to note that the word canon is today sometimes used in non-religious contexts. In literary studies, for instance, there have been some lively debates over the canon of English literature. The key question here has been: Which works should one include as worthy of study in a university course? More importantly, which works have traditionally been excluded, as unworthy of our attention, and why? Has the time come to incorporate previously marginalized voices—perhaps those of women or of African-American writers—into the canon?

Of course, similar questions can be asked of the Bible. There are, for instance, a number of early Christian gospels that the church came to regard as extra-canonical, that is, as not having authoritative status. (Such works are sometimes referred to as apocryphal works.) Often such works were excluded from the canon because they were thought to embody false teachings. Some of the non-canonical gospels, for instance, were connected with groups that are described today as Gnostic, a term that embraces a number of religious movements that flourished in the second century of the Christian era. These movements combined Christian beliefs with elaborate myths about the origin of the world in ways that made many of the church fathers deeply uneasy.

In recent decades, theologians have sometimes wanted to revisit these judgments. They have argued that such marginalized Christian groups may have something to tell us. In effect, this means questioning the limits of our present canon by suggesting that certain works should not have been excluded. But it is not only theologians who sometimes question the limits of the canon; the same is true of historians. If historians are in search of the history of biblical Judaism and early Christianity, they will make use of canonical and non-canonical works alike. For instance, some contemporary writers on the "historical Jesus" will refer to the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas, believing that this work embodies historically reliable information.

Whatever one may think of the limits of the canon, the existence of a canon of Scripture is a historical fact. For better or for worse, the canon of Scripture constitutes the Bible as we know it. It is the formation of the biblical canon that is of interest here. When did this particular collection of books come to be formed? Who was involved in its formation? What books were included? What criteria were used in the selection of these particular writings?

Before we begin looking at the details of this process, the reader may wish to note a particular feature of biblical scholarship. Because such scholarship is engaged in by Jews and Christians alike, one often finds the religiously more inclusive abbreviations B.C.E., "Before the Common Era," and C.E., "Common Era," which are used in place of the more common B.C., "Before Christ," and A.D., *Anno Domini*, "in the year of [our] Lord." While these two sets of terms have different meanings, they divide history in exactly the same way. As a matter of consistency, the New Collegeville Bible Commentary uses B.C. and A.D.

THE FORMATION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT CANON

First of all, we should examine the collection of writings that Christians customarily call the Old Testament. It is difficult to be certain about the events that led to the formation of the Old Testament canon. Some Old Testament books may contain material that is much older than the books in the present form, reaching back into the early centuries of the first millennium B.C. The traditions that constitute these books probably first circulated by word of mouth, since the Old Testament seems to have its origins in an oral culture.

Other traditions may have existed in written form before being incorporated into the books we now have. Biblical scholars have spilled much ink researching the formation of individual books and debating the date of the materials they contain. (For further information, the reader should consult the individual commentaries in this series.) But my concern here is not with the process by which individual books were formed; I am interested in the process by which these books were collected into an authoritative body of literature.

(a) The crisis of the Exile

A key event in this development seems to have been the Babylonian Exile, a series of tragedies that befell the Jewish people in Palestine in the sixth century B.C. On two occasions—first in the year 597 B.C. and then in the year 586 B.C.—the armies of the great empire of Babylon swept down from the north to destroy the Jewish kingdom in southern Palestine. This was not the first political catastrophe to be experienced by the Jewish inhabitants of the land. In the year 722 B.C. the armies of a previous Mesopotamian superpower, Assyria, had laid waste to the northern part of the Jewish-occupied land of Palestine. But according to the biblical history, the Jewish population of the North had long formed a separate kingdom, following a schism that had occurred in about the year 922 B.C.

At the time of the destruction of this Northern Kingdom the inhabitants of the Southern Kingdom, that of Judah, had escaped relatively unscathed. It seems from the account offered by the prophet Jeremiah (see, for instance, Jeremiah 7) that by the sixth century B.C. the inhabitants of Judah felt secure. They believed that the dynasty established by King David in Jerusalem enjoyed divine protection and that the Temple of God established in that city would never be destroyed.

The catastrophe of 586 B.C. put an end to this complacency. The Babylonians not only destroyed the city of Jerusalem and its temple and took a large part of the population of Judea into exile, but they also captured the ruling Jewish king and put his sons to death before his eyes prior to blinding him and taking him into exile as their prisoner. (One can read the biblical account of these events in 2 Kings 25.)

It would be difficult to overestimate the religious crisis brought on by these events. What had happened to God's promises to Israel? What had become of the promise of the land of Israel, the promise that the descendants of David would rule as kings in the city of Jerusalem? Israel's identity as a nation seemed to be in ruins. It fell to the prophets of that period, particularly the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel, to interpret the crisis and to give hope to the nation once again. The memory of their words helped to shape the Old Testament as we have it.

Of particular importance were the collected sayings of the prophet Jeremiah that seem to have been shaped by traditions now found in the book of Deuteronomy. According to the books of both Deuteronomy and Jeremiah, the promises of God were conditional. Their fulfillment was dependent on Israel's obedience to the Torah, the law given to Moses. On these grounds, the catastrophe of the Exile was explicable. It was not the case that God had abandoned Israel. On the contrary, Israel had abandoned God by failing to observe the law God had given. The defeat suffered at the hands of the Babylonians was a divine punishment. But it was not the last word. God may punish but would also restore, bringing Israel back to the land and rebuilding its temple. The book of Jeremiah could even speak of a "New Covenant," comparable to that originally made with Moses on Mt. Sinai (see Jeremiah 31).

The words of Jeremiah are important for many reasons. Not least among these is the fact that Christians would later claim to be the heirs of this New Covenant (or New Testament). The traditions found in Deuteronomy and Jeremiah are also of importance for the formation of the Old Testament canon, since it was this interpretation of the Exile that seems to have prompted one of the earliest attempts to compile and edit Israel's

The Prophet Jeremiah by Michelangelo, fresco, Sistine Chapel, Rome


HIEREMIAS

religious traditions. The traditions in question are those that make up our biblical books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. Many scholars believe that these books have been edited into a more or less unified story, often described as the "Deuteronomistic History," because of its similarity in spirit to the book of Deuteronomy.

The formation of this early collection of biblical materials remains a matter of scholarly conjecture. It is widely believed to have been completed toward the end of the years of exile, which lasted from 586 to about the year 538 B.C., when the Persian king Cyrus, the new ruler of the Mediterranean world, permitted the Jewish exiles to return to Palestine. We should probably not describe the compilation of the Deuteronomistic History as an attempt to produce "Sacred Scripture"; we know too little about the circumstances of its origin and about the attitude of its editors. But the compilation and editing of these traditions represent an early attempt to make sense of Israel's history in the light of a firm faith in Israel's God. If this is correct, the formation of the Deuteronomistic History is an important step toward the Bible as we know it.

(b) The growth of the canon

Much of the history I have presented to this point is conjectural. While it seems well supported by the biblical writings themselves, the interpretation I have offered is still open to dispute. If we want clearer evidence of the formation of an Old Testament canon, we must look to the time of the Jewish scribe Ezra in the mid-fifth century B.C. As we have seen, the Deuteronomistic History was probably assembled in the final years of the Exile. During those years, or in the period immediately following the Exile, other parts of what was to become the biblical canon were also being collected. In particular, the book of Deuteronomy was soon linked to the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers to form what has come to be known as the "Pentateuch," the first five books of our present Bible. Within the Jewish world, these first five books are deemed particularly worthy of the title "Torah": the revealed law of God for Israel.

Ezra is remembered as a pious and learned Jewish leader who came from Babylon to the land of Palestine, perhaps about the year 458 B.C. Once in Palestine, he set about inaugurating a strict religious reform. As part of this reform (we are told in the book of Nehemiah) Ezra set up a wooden pulpit in the Water Gate Square in Jerusalem. From this pulpit he read aloud to the people from what seems to have been a set of Sacred Scriptures. These Scriptures are described as "the book of the law of Moses which the LORD prescribed for Israel" (Neh 8:1). As a result of Ezra's read-

ing, the people repented of their sins and committed themselves afresh to keeping this law of God. What were these Sacred Scriptures that Ezra is reported to have read?

From the context it seems likely that what Ezra read were the first five books of our present Old Testament. There is much debate about the origin of these books—the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—each of which seems to have been gradually assembled from oral and written sources sometime before this date. This discussion need not concern us here. All I am interested in is the process by which they became a single unit.

The story of Ezra suggests that by the mid-fifth century B.C., the first five books of the Bible were already regarded as forming a collection that is thought to have divine authority. This collection does not just represent the law of Israel; it represents the law of God. If we assume that the books that form the Deuteronomistic history reached their present form in the previous century, and if we assume that the oracles or pronouncements of some of the prophets had also been preserved, then it seems that by the mid-fifth century a fair portion of the present Old Testament is already in existence.

This is certainly the case by the mid-second century B.C. The author of the preface to the book of Sirach, for instance, writing shortly after 132 B.C., can speak of "the law and the prophets and the other books of our fathers." Given the later Jewish division of the Old Testament into three parts—the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings—it seems that by the mid-second century at least the first two of these parts were already assembled and were being studied as Sacred Scripture. The third category, described here as "the other books of our fathers," is unclear; we cannot know for certain which books it contained.

By the time of the New Testament, the situation seems little changed. In a story found at the end of Luke's Gospel, the risen Jesus appears to his disciples and explains to them the passages "in the law of Moses and in the prophets and psalms" that were about himself (Luke 24:44). Once again, the first two terms refer to what are now familiar parts of the Old Testament, but the precise composition of the third category seems unclear. It presumably includes a book of Psalms but probably embraces a wider range of writings.

It follows that by the time of the New Testament, the Old Testament canon as we know it was largely established, although its boundaries remained uncertain. (In Jewish circles it was not, of course, known as the Old Testament; this is a later, Christian title.) It is not entirely clear, for instance, which writings the New Testament authors would have considered to be

Sacred Scripture. Their Bible may have included a larger number of writings than those that form our present Old Testament. On the other hand, one or two of the books in our present Old Testament may not have been regarded as Sacred Scripture by the New Testament writers. (The rabbinic literature records Jewish debates, apparently from the late first century A.D., about the canonical status of both Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs.) At least one New Testament book (Jude 14–15) quotes from what would later be regarded as a non-canonical work (the book of Enoch) in the same manner as one would quote from Sacred Scripture. It seems that the process by which the canon was formed was not yet complete.

(c) Canonical and deuterocanonical books

These remarks highlight the difficulties that surround the question of what is called the closure of the Old Testament canon: the process by which these particular books, and these particular books alone, came to be regarded as having divine authority. With regard to the closure of the canon within Judaism, it used to be believed that the decision was made by an authoritative Council of Jewish teachers in the Palestinian town of Jamnia (or Yavneh) about the year 90 A.D. In more recent times scholars have questioned this tradition. However the decision was made, the end of the first century A.D. does seem to have marked a turning point within Judaism. After this date there seems to have been little significant disagreement about which books should be read as Sacred Scripture.

Among Christians, on the other hand, the limits of the Old Testament canon have remained a matter of debate. In particular, there exists a disagreement between the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches and those churches that emerged from the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation. What are rather misleadingly called "Protestant Bibles" contain thirty-nine Old Testament books, while what are sometimes called "Catholic Bibles" contain forty-six Old Testament books. (There are also small differences between the canon of the Orthodox churches and that of the Roman Catholic Church, but I will not deal with that matter here.)

The disputed books are often referred to by Protestants as the apocrypha, a term that originally meant "hidden" (or perhaps "obscure") books. Among Catholics these books are often referred to as deuterocanonical books, that is to say, books belonging to the second canon. Neither term is entirely satisfactory. The word "apocrypha" is often taken to imply that these books are somehow spurious, which is unfair. The term "deuterocanonical" is also inappropriate since—as we will see in a moment—there never was a second canon. Unfortunately, there is no alternative desig-

nation. In more recent Bibles, intended for use by Christians of different churches, the disputed books are sometimes included but are separated from the body of the text in an appendix or are placed between the Old and New Testaments.

How did this rather awkward situation come about? The decisive factor in this development was the existence within Judaism of a translation of the Old Testament into Greek. This translation is generally known as the Septuagint (the Latin term for "seventy," abbreviated LXX), because it is said to have been produced in the third century B.C. by seventy (or seventy-two) translators. (We will come back to this story when discussing ancient translations.) Understandably this translation was widely used by Greek-speaking Jews outside of Palestine, whose knowledge of Hebrew was often minimal. When the New Testament writers, for instance, cite Sacred Scripture, they generally refer to the Septuagint Greek translation rather than the original Hebrew text.

The problem is that the Septuagint does not merely include the books of the Hebrew Bible as this was later defined. This collection of Jewish religious texts also includes other works, whether originally written in Hebrew or in Greek. It is easy to see how this broader collection could have been compiled. After all, the Septuagint was being formed at a time when the limits of what we call the Old Testament canon were still unclear. So there was no one authoritative canon to which the translators could refer. The Septuagint's larger collection of books is sometimes known as the Alexandrian canon, after the city of its production (hence the term "deuterocanonical" meaning "belonging to the second canon"). But to speak of an Alexandrian canon is misleading, since it implies that the biblical canon was already fixed.

Within early Christianity the most common practice seems to have been to follow the larger collection found within the Septuagint. When some local church councils in the fourth and fifth century, for instance, produced lists of Old Testament books, it was the larger collection that they cited. On the other hand, at least one early Christian writer disputed the value of the Septuagint. The writer in question was none other than the great biblical scholar St. Jerome (ca. 342–420). Jerome vigorously defended his translations from the Hebrew text against the suggestion of St. Augustine (354–430) that he rest content with the Septuagint.

As far as the canon was concerned, Jerome's preference seems to have been for the smaller, Hebrew collection. In any case, this collection was the unambiguous choice of the Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century. Their decision may well have been motivated by theological concerns.

The deuterocanonical books of Maccabees, for instance, encourage prayer for the dead, which could lend support to the Catholic doctrine of purgatory. It was also motivated by the same desire that motivated St. Jerome: a desire to return to the original languages of the Bible and to interpret the biblical text afresh. By way of reaction to the Reformers, the Catholic Church reiterated its traditional preference for the larger collection, defining this collection as canonical in 1546 during the Council of Trent.

Fig. 1: The Canon of the Old Testament

The books of the Old Testament are listed here in the order of the Hebrew (Jewish) canon, with the addition of the deuterocanonical works which are accepted as canonical by Catholics.

Pentateuch (*Torah*)
- Genesis
- Exodus
- Leviticus
- Numbers
- Deuteronomy

The Prophets (*Nevi'im*)
- Joshua
- Judges
- 1–2 Samuel
- 1–2 Kings

} also known as the "Former Prophets" or (in modern times) the "Deuteronomistic History"

- Isaiah
- Jeremiah
- Ezekiel

Hosea	Jonah	Zephaniah	} sometimes known as the twelve "Minor Prophets"
Joel	Micah	Haggai	
Amos	Nahum	Zechariah	
Obadiah	Habakkuk	Malachi	

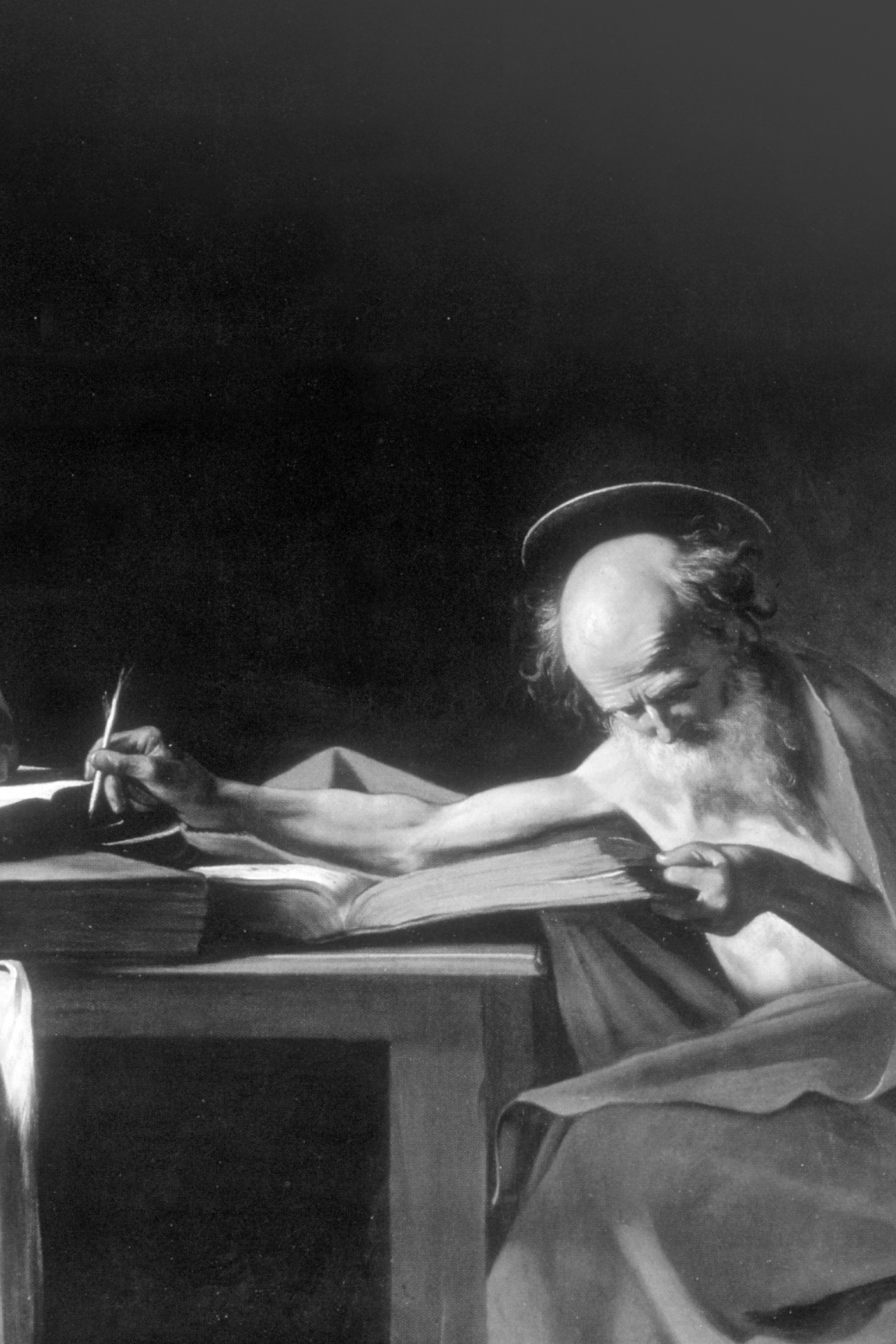
The Writings (*Ketuvim*)

Psalms	Lamentations	Daniel
Job	Esther	Ezra
Proverbs	Song of Songs	Nehemiah
Ruth	Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes)	1–2 Chronicles

The Deuterocanonical Works (also called the Apocrypha)

Judith	1–2 Maccabees
Tobit	Ecclesiasticus (Sirach)
Baruch	Wisdom of Solomon

St. Jerome by Caravaggio, detail of oil painting; courtesy of Planet Art



THE FORMATION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

While the origins of the Old Testament canon are sometimes difficult to discern, we know more about the formation of the New Testament. As was the case with the formation of the Old Testament, this was a gradual process that took place over several hundred years. In a way that seems remarkable to us, it appears that the decision about the New Testament canon was not made by any one authority. Nor does there seem to have been any one moment at which one could speak of an agreement being reached. As we will see, various church fathers and various local councils did draw up lists of canonical New Testament books. In the end the matter seems to have been decided by a process of lively debate and gradually emerging consensus among the local Christian churches. In the following pages I will try to trace this process by looking at some of its significant moments.

(a) The Old Testament as Christian Scripture

As was the case with the Old Testament Scriptures, the writings of the New Testament seem to have emerged from a lively oral culture. The focus of early Christian faith was not a set of writings. It was a proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus and of its significance for human beings. In addition to this central proclamation, individual sayings of Jesus seem to have been preserved and handed on, particularly for use in moral exhortation. If the earliest Christians required biblical support for their message, then they found plenty of support in their Jewish Scriptures, for—even if the limits of the Old Testament canon were not yet fixed—Judaism already had its Sacred Scriptures. The Law and the Prophets along with a number of other writings were regarded as the word of God.

It was true that the followers of Jesus sometimes had to employ new styles of interpretation in order to uncover the Christian meaning of these Jewish Scriptures (see, for instance, Gal 4:21-31). The earliest Christians were in no doubt that their message about Christ could be found in what we call the Old Testament, even if it was sometimes hidden beneath the surface (as it were) of the biblical text. Christianity was therefore never without a set of Sacred Scriptures. Just as it began its life as a movement within Judaism, so its earliest Scriptures were those that it shared with the larger Jewish community.

Even when early Christians began composing written accounts of their faith, they probably did not think they were writing a new set of Sacred Scriptures. Christianity already had its Bible, namely the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament). When Christians recorded their message about Jesus in writing, they did so at different times and for all kinds of immediate, prac-

tical purposes. The letters of St. Paul, for instance, are clearly occasional literature, written for particular individuals and communities to fulfill particular needs.

There were two set of events, however, that may have encouraged the writing down of the earliest Christian proclamation. The first was the death of the apostolic generation, the eyewitnesses to the events of Jesus' life. As those who had known Jesus after the flesh passed away, it must have seemed vital to record their testimony for future generations. The second key event was probably the destruction of the city of Jerusalem by the Romans in the year 70. This catastrophe not only hastened the break between the Christian community and Judaism but also involved the dispersal of the Christian church in Jerusalem, which had been an important center of evangelism. This event may also have encouraged Christians to record their beliefs in writings and to collect those writings into a single body of Scripture.

(b) Stages in the development of a canon

The first New Testament works to be collected were apparently the letters of the apostle Paul. Ignatius of Antioch, shortly before his martyrdom in about the year 107, wrote to the Christians of Ephesus in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). In this letter he noted that "the saintly Paul" mentioned them "in every one of his letters." This suggests that Paul's letters were known to him not just as individual letters but also as a collection. Within the New Testament itself, the second letter of Peter (2 Pet 3:15-16) speaks of the wisdom of Paul found "in all his letters," a wisdom "that the ignorant and unstable distort to their own destruction, just as they do the other scriptures." It is very hard to date Second Peter, which may also come from the beginning of the second century. In any case, it provides further evidence that there existed a collection of Paul's letters at a relatively early date. It even suggests that these letters are being treated as somehow authoritative, comparable to "the other scriptures."

Polycarp of Smyrna, who died about the year 155, is another witness to this development. In his letter to the Christians of Philippi he encourages them to pay close attention to the letters that the apostle Paul wrote after he had spent time among them. Once again, at least some of Paul's letters were clearly in circulation, although it is impossible to tell how many or which ones.

As far as the gospels are concerned, we find individual sayings of Jesus cited in early Christian writers. Our earliest witness to this fact is Clement of Rome, whose first letter to the church in Corinth probably dates from

the 90s of the first century. Only a few years later Ignatius of Antioch also quotes some words of Jesus. In neither case, however, can we be confident that these writers had access to written gospels, let alone to a collection of gospels. Writing some decades into the second century, Polycarp of Smyrna makes reference to a passage from the Gospel of Matthew in a way that does suggest he had a written text. Once again we do not know whether he had access to more than one account of Jesus' life.

Clearer evidence for the existence of a collection of gospels can be found in the writings of Justin Martyr, who died about the year 165. Justin speaks of the "memoirs of the apostles or of those who followed them," and it seems from the extracts he gives that he is speaking of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. (These three gospels are often referred to as the "Synoptic Gospels" because of their close relationship with one another.) Justin's work also tells us that these gospels were being read during the Sunday liturgy.

Finally, if we are looking for evidence of our present set of four gospels, we may find it in the story of the early Christian scholar Tatian, who died about 160. Tatian is said to have produced a harmonized version of the accounts of Jesus' life in a work entitled the *Diatesseron*. The name of the work, which may be literally translated "by means of the four," suggests that he had access to four gospels, presumably the same four as we have today. The fact that he could take such liberties with their text is also revealing: it suggests that these four gospels had not yet achieved a fixed status as Sacred Scripture.

The formation of a closed New Testament canon with authoritative status was encouraged by the work of Marcion, who also died about the year 160. Marcion was an early Christian thinker who believed there was a radical opposition between the God of the Old Testament and that of the New Testament. This belief led him to a thoroughgoing revision of the existing Christian Scriptures, which were purged of all elements that referred to the Old Testament. Needless to say, not much was left. From the existing gospels, for example, Marcion accepted only a highly edited version of the Gospel of Luke. The church as a whole rejected Marcion's position, but in doing so it was forced to name certain writings as authoritative.

A key figure here seems to have been Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. 130–200), who insisted that our four gospels, and only our four gospels, should be accepted as reliable and authoritative. Although there continued to be some debate regarding the Gospel of Luke, probably because of its use by Marcion, Irenaeus' position soon became widely accepted. It seems, therefore, that by the end of the second century there existed a fixed and authoritative collection of four gospels.

Fig. 2: The Canon of the New Testament

The Gospels
- Matthew, Mark, Luke } The Synoptic Gospels
- John

The Acts of the Apostles (a continuation of the Gospel of Luke)

The Letters of Paul

Romans	Colossians
1–2 Corinthians	1–2 Thessalonians
Galatians	1–2 Timothy
Ephesians	Titus
Philippians	Philemon

The Letter to the Hebrews

The Letters to all Christians (also known as the Catholic Epistles)
- James
- 1–2 Peter
- 1–3 John
- Jude

The Book of Revelation (also known as the Apocalypse)

As far as the canonical status of the other books of the New Testament is concerned, there continued to be some debate through to the end of the fourth century. Between the end of the second century and the end of the fourth century we find two contrary tendencies. On the one hand, a few of the books that were eventually accepted into the canon continued to be regarded with suspicion. Particularly debated were the letter to the Hebrews and the book of Revelation. On the other hand, some early Christian writings that were eventually rejected from the canon were still competing for acceptance. For instance, the Christians of this period showed a particular fondness for an early second-century work known as the letter of Barnabas.

This state of uncertainty is reflected in the writer Origen, who in about the year 253 can speak of three categories of writings. The first category is that of "undisputed" books, whose authority all Christians accepted. The second is that of "doubtful" books, whose status was undecided. The third is that of what he calls "false" books, whose claim was to be rejected. A similar threefold classification can be found in the work of the church historian Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 260–340). A key figure in bring-

ing these controversies to an end seems to have been the theologian and church father Athanasius of Alexandria. In a letter dating from Easter 397, Athanasius set out our current list of twenty-seven books and insisted that only these were to be accepted as authoritative. This position was soon accepted by all the churches.

TEXTS AND TRANSLATIONS

(a) The transmission of the biblical text

It is one thing to have established a collection of canonical writings; it is quite another to transmit those writings unchanged from one generation to another. Before the European invention of printing in the mid-fifteenth century, biblical manuscripts had to be painstakingly copied by hand, either onto papyrus (a material similar to paper but made from the reed-like papyrus plant) or onto vellum (specially prepared calfskin). While medieval scribes developed remarkably efficient methods of copying, the process was still liable to error and produced works that were expensive for a reader to purchase.

As far as writing materials are concerned, in the Old Testament period the typical form was the scroll, which continues to be used for liturgical purposes within Judaism today. However, a scroll is not a very convenient object for a reader to consult. It requires two hands—one to hold the scroll while the other hand unfurls it—and it must be rewound after use in preparation for the next reader. A scroll can also be very long, so that in this respect too it is an unwieldy artifact. For instance, the sixty-six chapters of Isaiah require a scroll more than twenty-one feet (about seven meters) in length. This meant that it was all but impossible for the entire Old Testament to be recorded on one scroll. Very often separate scrolls were used for individual books.

This process was revolutionized by the invention of the *codex*, probably late in the first century of the Christian era. The codex consists of individual pages bound together into something resembling our modern book. Indeed the development of the codex seems to have been pioneered by Christians out of their desire to preserve and consult their sacred writings.

If biblical texts were copied by hand and if this process was of necessity subject to error, then how can we be sure that our Bibles are accurate copies of the original documents? The short answer to this question is that we cannot. Despite some extraordinary discoveries in recent times, we do not have a Hebrew manuscript of the entire Old Testament that is older than the tenth century A.D. We do, however, have ancient manuscripts of the entire Greek New Testament, some of which take us back to the fourth

A Torah and the Western Wall in Jerusalem; courtesy of Dreamstime.com and Jhaviv

century A.D. We also have ancient manuscripts of individual biblical books, both of the Old and New Testaments, as well as many papyrus and vellum fragments. These provide a rich resource for the student of the biblical text. The Bible is certainly no worse off in this respect than any other ancient work. Indeed we have a much richer supply of manuscript evidence for the Bible than we have for the classical authors of Greece and Rome.

Nonetheless, the task of piecing together a reliable text—a task known as textual criticism—remains a difficult one in which capable scholars can reasonably adopt different positions. It is also a highly specialized task, requiring detailed knowledge of the individual manuscripts, their relationship to one another, and the history of their transmission. Where uncertainties remain, our modern biblical translations will frequently contain footnotes that indicate that at this point different manuscripts have different texts. These footnotes typically have the form: "some witnesses read . . . ," or perhaps "other ancient authorities read . . . ," with the variant text following. A quick glance at such footnotes will show the reader how minor such variant "readings" (as they are known) generally are.

Of particular significance for textual critics has been the discovery, beginning in 1947, of a series of ancient manuscripts by the shore of the Dead Sea near an ancient settlement known today as Khirbet Qumran. This discovery has been an important one for a number of reasons. For instance, these "Dead Sea Scrolls" have shown us how diverse Judaism was around the beginning of the Christian era. While making no direct reference to the Christian movement, the Scrolls have shed light on the world in which that movement developed.

What is worth noting here, however, is that the Qumran scrolls include much biblical material. In particular, they include both a complete copy of the book of Isaiah and fragments of all the other Old Testament books (i.e., the books of the Hebrew canon), except that of Esther. These texts and fragments are all much older than any previously extant manuscripts. While these discoveries have provided new evidence for textual critics to use, they have also demonstrated how reliable the traditional Hebrew text was. This traditional text, known as the Masoretic text (after the Masoretes, the Jewish scholars of the sixth to ninth centuries A.D. who edited it), remains the basis of our present-day editions and translations.

(b) Ancient translations

The books of our Christian Bible were originally written in three different languages. Most of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew, although small sections were written in a language that is a close relative of Hebrew,

namely, Aramaic. While Jesus himself apparently spoke Aramaic, the whole of the New Testament was written in the common language of the Mediterranean world, namely, Greek. It follows that for most readers who have little or no knowledge of the biblical languages, access to the Bible will be through translations. (For serious study, of course, access to the original languages is indispensable.) For this reason the student will find it helpful to know something about some of the better known biblical translations.

The best known ancient translation of the Bible has already been mentioned. It is the Greek translation of the Old Testament that is known as the Septuagint (LXX). While the Septuagint was in all likelihood produced by a number of translators over several centuries, the traditional story of its origin highlights the authority it had within the Greek-speaking Jewish world. The story is found in a work known as the Letter of Aristeas, which probably dates from about the second century B.C. According to this source, a certain King Ptolemy (probably Ptolemy II Philadelphius [285–247 B.C.]) wished to have copies of all the books of the world. He therefore commissioned a translation of the Jewish Scriptures by sending a letter to the High Priest in Jerusalem. The High Priest sent the King seventy-two translators (six from each of the twelve tribes), who completed the work of translation in precisely seventy-two days.

Modern scholars consider the Letter of Aristeas to have all the marks of legend, and the real history of the Septuagint is much debated. While its oldest sections may well have been produced by the Jews of Alexandria in the third century B.C., as Jewish tradition suggest, it does seem to have undergone a series of later revisions. In any case, the Septuagint was an important work for Greek-speaking Jews for several hundred years. It fell out of favor among Jewish scholars only after the first century A.D., possibly because of its widespread adoption by Christians. But the Septuagint remained important within the Christian world, being the preferred biblical text not only of the New Testament writers but also of many of the church fathers. St. Augustine, for instance, believed that its translation was divinely inspired. To this day, the Septuagint continues to be a widely used translation of the Bible among Greek-speaking Orthodox Christians.

The second ancient translation worthy of mention is that known as the Vulgate, a name that suggests that this was an *editio vulgata*, or "common edition," of the biblical text. The Vulgate is a translation of the Bible into Latin, traditionally attributed to the early Christian scholar and ascetic, St. Jerome. Concerned by the lack of agreement among the existing Old Latin versions, Pope Damasus (ca. 304–384) commissioned Jerome, the leading biblical scholar of his age, to undertake a new Latin translation. While

Jerome began his translation, as was customary at that time, from the Septuagint, he soon became aware of its deficiencies. This led him to undertake a more thorough translation, this time from the Hebrew text whose authority he vigorously defended. This new Latin version appeared between the years 390 and 405.

The Vulgate as we have it today, however, is not identical to the text produced by St. Jerome. Indeed our present Vulgate seems to be a composite work: some coming from Jerome, some representing surviving Old Latin translations, and some freshly revised after Jerome's time. Its importance lies in the fact that it remained the most influential version of the Bible throughout the Middle Ages. After a decree of the Council of Trent in 1546, the Vulgate became the official Latin Bible of the Catholic Church, being published in an official edition in 1592. For this reason, most Catholic translations of the Bible in the modern period were made from the Vulgate. This remained the case right up until 1943 when translations from the original languages were officially sanctioned. A revised edition of the Vulgate was published by Pope John Paul II in 1979 under the title *Nova Vulgata* (New Vulgate).

(c) Modern translations

No attempt can be made here to cover the diversity of modern translations of the Bible that today cover more than 350 of the world's languages. But it may be worth mentioning the most famous early English translations, both Protestant and Catholic.

The first complete translation of the Bible into English was made from the Latin Vulgate by John Wycliffe and his supporters, between 1382 and 1384. Wycliffe's translation became the common English Bible of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The earliest printed biblical translations in English were those of William Tyndale, his New Testament first appearing in 1525. Tyndale later published some parts of the Old Testament, but he died as a Protestant martyr in 1536 before his translation could be completed. Tyndale's translation is noteworthy not only for its lively English, which left its imprint on later translations, but also because he worked from the original languages.

Because Tyndale's translation was never completed, the honor of being the first complete printed English Bible falls to the translation of Miles Coverdale, published in 1535. But the most famous English Bible ever produced is undoubtedly the Authorized Version, commonly known as the King James Version, of 1611. This edition became so popular that among many Protestant Christians it achieved almost canonical status in its own

right. The King James tradition was continued in the Revised Version of 1881 and 1885, the Revised Standard Version of 1946 and 1952, and the New Revised Standard Version of 1989.

Some of these early editions of the Bible in English were regarded by Catholics with suspicion. Generally speaking, this was not so much because of their translations as because of the notes that often accompanied them, notes that continued the Protestant Reformers' attacks on the Catholic Church. Catholics therefore undertook their own translations of the Bible into English. Up until the mid-twentieth century, these translations were generally based on the text of the Latin Vulgate. Noteworthy among these was the Douay-Rheims version, the New Testament of which was published in 1582 and the Old Testament in 1609. The language of this translation was somewhat improved by a revision undertaken between 1749 and 1763 by Bishop Richard Challoner of London.

More recent Catholic translations from the original languages include the New American Bible of 1952 and 1970 (the New Testament of which was extensively revised in 1987), a translation entitled the Jerusalem Bible (published in 1966 but originally produced in French), and the significantly revised New Jerusalem Bible (published in 1985). In more recent times the cooperation of Protestant and Catholic scholars in the work of biblical translation, as well as the inclusion of the deuterocanonical books in most scholarly editions, seems to be bringing an end to the age of separate, confessional biblical texts.

With regard to contemporary biblical translations, it may be useful to make some comment on the philosophies that underlie the different versions. An attentive reader of Bible translations will soon realize that they may be located on a spectrum. At the one end of the spectrum are those translations that attempt, as much as possible, to render one Greek or Hebrew word with a corresponding English word. Of course, a completely word-for-word rendering would produce a terribly stilted style of English. Indeed it would border on the unintelligible. But some translations do try to keep as close as possible to this ideal. Some of the early English translations seem to have followed this principle. The King James Version, for instance, even printed in italic type words added by its translators that do not correspond to words in the Greek or Hebrew text.

At the other end of the spectrum are those translations that attempt to discover the sense of a Greek or Hebrew phrase and then to reproduce this meaning freely in English. The correspondence aimed at here is not that of words, but that of meaning. If that meaning is thought to be best conveyed by an entirely idiomatic English phrase, then that phrase will be

chosen even if it is far removed from the manner of speech adopted by the biblical writers. Both types of translation undoubtedly have their use, but the reader who wishes to undertake a close study of the biblical text will normally choose the former.

(d) Division into chapters and verses

It may also be helpful to comment on the division of our Bibles into chapters and verses. The Old Testament was already divided into sections in ancient times; such divisions may even be found among the manuscripts at Qumran. But these divisions of the text do not correspond to our modern chapters. Generally speaking, they marked off sections of text for weekly study, a practice that continued within Judaism. Similarly, the oldest Greek manuscripts of the New Testament are also provided with chapter divisions. But these, too, do not correspond to our modern chapters. It was only in the thirteenth century that the entire Bible came to be divided into chapters. This development occurred at the University of Paris in the course of developing a standard biblical text. The chapter divisions were then carried over into the Hebrew manuscripts in the fourteenth century.

As far as verse divisions are concerned, ancient Hebrew manuscripts did sometimes contain numbered verses. But the verses were not numbered by chapter as is our practice today. The present verse numbering of the Old Testament dates only from some printed editions of 1563 and 1571. The verse numbering of the New Testament is of a similar date. It is first found in the fourth edition of the Greek New Testament printed in 1551 by the Parisian publisher Robert Estienne (also known by his Latin name Stephanus). Indeed Stephanus is said to have divided the New Testament into verses while on a journey between Lyons and Paris.

These remarks indicate that the present chapter and verse divisions of our Bible were imposed upon the text at a relatively late date. While they are convenient, they have no particular authority and can sometimes be misleading. For this reason they should not be regarded as a guide to the interpretation of the text. The careful student of the Bible would be well advised simply to ignore them.

Qumran caves near Dead Sea, Israel; courtesy of Corel Photos