

Scribes and scriptures

Not until modern times has the Bible been so accessible and understandable.

Choose your preferred version and take advantage of a broad range of commentaries and devotional guides. We use many words to describe the Bible: inspired, mystical, magical, inerrant, the words of life, and guide to faith and practice. As you approach the Bible,



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it is vital to understand it cannot begin to replace the ultimate reality of God's love and grace. John 1:1 is absolute in its declaration that "In the beginning was the Word (Jesus), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (NASV).

I view the Bible through the lens of "inspiration," the idea that God seeks a personal relationship with us, first through walking with Adam and Eve in the garden, then through limited revelations through prophets and priests, and, ultimately through Jesus the Christ. Some of our modern ideas about the Bible actually come from worldly ideas of philosophy and magic. The Bible is not a repository of secrets only a select few may know, nor a handbook of magical prayers and rituals, nor a textbook of physical sciences. Instead, it is our only reliable introduction to God's purpose and plan of redemption, which points us to Jesus as God's ultimate way to eternal/meaningful life.

The Bible began its life before written languages, printing presses or publishers like Simon and Schuster. It began as verbal stories, repeated around campfires, taught to children, passed down through generations, then written and rewritten. The Old Testament canon was not fixed until the first century AD and the New Testament canon by the fourth century AD. God partnered with humanity to express his love and grace through each generation, building on our experiences until the ultimate revelation of Christ.

Today's passages help us understand

the miracle of God revealing himself through human instruments. Jeremiah 1:1-2 (CEB) declares: "These are the words of Jeremiah... The Lord's word came to Jeremiah in the thirteenth year of Judah's King Josiah." Did you catch that? This book contains both the prophet's words and God's words, telling us that this book is a blending of God speaking, Jeremiah translating that message into his historical setting and offering it for application even in our day.

The original words focused on an extremely dangerous time (605 BC) when the Babylonians defeated all other world powers and were about to conquer Judah. God's word says Jeremiah was to write down all his preaching from the beginning of his ministry until that day and send his scribe, Baruch, to read it all in the Temple so the people could repent of their sins. A colorful story unfolds as the king has the scroll brought from the office of Elishama the scribe, has it read in the palace and burns it! No repentance!

The king commands the arrest of Jeremiah and Baruch, but God hides them. So Jeremiah dictated a whole new copy of the burned scroll, including an update: "Many similar words were added to them" (v. 32). This is a telling picture of editing, a secretary writing for a prophet and a book that grew with the ongoing narrative. We are reminded that inspiration from God is not a blind dictation in which the writer is a robot who moves the pen without his own mental and spiritual awareness.

Luke 1:1-4 offers a more recent insight that a first century AD Gentile medical doctor, who was a Roman citizen, added significantly to the salvation narrative. Luke wrote this account so that Theophilus (and probably other non-Jewish readers) could "have confidence in the soundness of the instruction you have received" (v. 4, CEB). Luke refers to the many eyewitnesses and already existing accounts of Jesus' life... his "having investigated everything carefully from the beginning"... that he is now writing a "carefully ordered

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Scripture: Jeremiah 36:4-8; 20-26, 32, Luke 1:1-4

account" (vv. 2-3). Much of Luke's Gospel repeats material from Mark. Luke is a diligent writer, reading existing documents, perhaps doing interviews with those who traveled with Jesus, maybe even talking with Jesus' elderly mother and carefully arranging it all in the beautiful format we read today. I am amazed by the different writers of our Bible and how each one was inspired by God's Spirit to share unchanging life-shaping truths in every age.

No original manuscripts of any books of the Bible exist, and rarely are there any complete manuscripts of a particular book. We have segments and copies with variations, which scholars continually examine to put together a complete text. Through the centuries, scribes have copied manuscripts and then individual styles have produced variations in language and structure. Even the four Gospel writers have given us accounts of Jesus' life that do not match exactly.

No two witnesses see or remember every event or word exactly the same. But when you read then all you get a fuller, richer picture. Our New Testament letters were often dictated (much like Jeremiah and Baruch), then copied many times by different scribes to circulate among the churches. This does not alarm us or question the authority of the Bible because we know the Holy Spirit continues to guide and inspire us through the written word (see 2 Timothy 3:14-17).

Since the first day God walked with Adam and Eve in Eden, he has continued to reveal himself to us through imperfect writers and their words. The Bible is both human and divine in its form. We describe Jesus in the same way as we praise God for his greatest gift!

Retired after 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.