



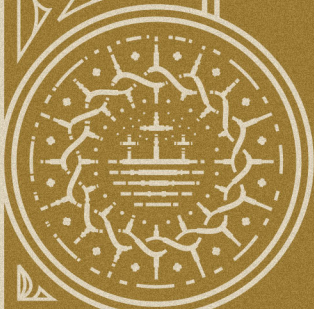
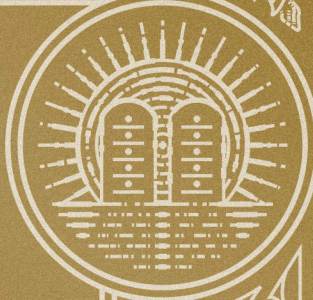
GREG
GILBERT

THE

EPIC STORY

of the
BIBLE

*How to Read
and Understand
God's Word*



“Greg Gilbert is a world-class expositor. (Trust me; I got to sit under his preaching for nearly twelve years.) *The Epic Story of the Bible* will revolutionize your ability to grasp the sweeping, soaring narrative that centers—from Genesis to Revelation—on Jesus the King. Read and marvel.”

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Drew Hunter, Teaching Pastor, Zionville Fellowship, Zionville,
Indiana; author, *Made for Friendship*

The Epic Story of the Bible

The Epic Story of the Bible

How to Read and Understand God's Word

Greg Gilbert

 **CROSSWAY**[®]
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The Epic Story of the Bible: How to Read and Understand God's Word

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Contents

Introduction	9
1 What the Bible Is, and Where It Came From	19
2 The Trail Ahead: The Grand Storyline of the Bible	35
3 My Dwelling Place: The Theme of God's Presence	63
4 You Will Be My People: The Theme of Covenant	83
5 The Lord's Anointed: The Theme of Kingship	113
6 Without Blood, There Is No Forgiveness: The Theme of Sacrifice	139
7 Setting Out	159
General Index	167
Scripture Index	171

Introduction

AS THE PLANE DESCENDED toward the city, I didn't see any mountains out the window. At some level, this was disappointing, because that was why I'd come in the first place. But on the other hand, when your plane is landing in a driving rainstorm, your primary emotion usually isn't disappointment of any kind but rather just relief to feel the wheels land, the brakes kick in, and the plane slow down enough that your body slumps back down in the seat again. I dropped my head back and grinned. For a year, I'd been planning this trip, and now I was here, in Kathmandu, Nepal, about to set off on a two-week trek to the South Base Camp of Sagarmatha, better known as Mount Everest.

I was excited, and more than a little nervous. For whatever reason, I've always been fascinated by mountains, and through the years I've seized every opportunity I could to be in and among them—skiing the Rockies in Colorado, hiking the Green Mountains in Vermont and the White Mountains in New Hampshire and Maine, even spending a week in the utter wilderness of Alaska at a working gold mine, just for the fun of it. So when the time and opportunity opened up, I jumped at the chance to trek into

Introduction

the tallest, most dramatic mountain range in the world, the Himalayas, and set foot at the base of the tallest mountain on Earth. That's where the excitement came from.

The fear came from reading online about other people's experiences on this Base Camp trek. For the most part, what I had signed up to do was relatively easy and safe—no technical climbing, no crampons or elite winter gear or oxygen tanks required. This was *Everest for Dummies* for sure, not *Everest* the movie! And yet, it wasn't a walk in the park, either. By the end of the trek, we would finally top out at an elevation of 18,200 feet, high enough (I was told) that if a helicopter took you there immediately from sea level, you'd be unconscious within fifteen minutes due to the lack of oxygen. Of course we were planning to do all kinds of acclimatization, but still, I'd read the blogs. It was no sure thing that those measures would work for any given person. You can do everything right to get yourself ready for high altitudes, only to get halfway up into the Himalayas and realize suddenly—and sometimes catastrophically—that your body just doesn't have the necessary hardware. Your brain begins to swell, your lungs fill up with fluid, and within a few hours you find yourself being medevacked back to a Kathmandu hospital—that is, if the weather on the mountain is conducive to a rescue. Beyond that, there were other dangers, too: falls, broken bones, getting knocked off the mountain by a yak—you know, the usual kinds of things I have to think about in Louisville, Kentucky!

So as the plane pulled up to the gate at the Tribhuvan International Airport, Nepal's only international airport, I pulled my passport out of my backpack and turned to the page where my Nepali visa was pasted. I checked all my information again: name

Introduction

was spelled correctly, dates correct, vaccinations all up to date—a bunch of facts I’m sure I had confirmed probably a hundred times on this flight already, but excitement makes you do funny things. I shoved the passport back into its special pocket on my backpack and locked it in. I’d read on several websites that you can’t be too careful in the Kathmandu airport terminal. Besides the normal threats like theft of money and documents, I’d also been told of a terrifying scam in which the customs agents will sometimes “neglect” to stamp your visa as you pass through, and then when you show it to the next set of agents, you’re immediately placed under arrest for “invalid documentation.” From there, the scam is to get as much money out of you as possible. You’re given a choice—you can either spend a month in prison, or you can pay an exorbitant fee to be driven over the course of a few days to a bureaucratic office to “get it sorted out.” If you choose the latter, you pay up front and then—unbeknownst to you, of course—you’ll be told at various points along the way that it’s going to cost you even more money to get any further. Finally, after a week or so and a few thousand dollars, you return triumphantly to Kathmandu Airport with your newly “sorted out” visa.

Was any of that actually true? I have no idea. But you better believe I watched the customs agent like a hawk as he examined my passport. And I got that stamp, baby!

Fully sorted out diplomatically, I walked across the terminal to the pickup area, scanned the drivers holding signs with various people’s names on them, and finally found my guy, complete with a bright blue hat that read “Ultimate Expeditions.” Once in the van with two or three others, I finally relaxed and let myself revel in what was happening. I was in Nepal, about to hike to Mount

Introduction

Everest—not *up* it, no, but even hiking *to* Everest, I figured, was pretty amazing.

The plan for that evening was pretty straightforward. The driver would take me and the other passengers to our hotel, we'd have a little while to rest in our rooms, and then we'd gather in the hotel restaurant for dinner and what was being called “the briefing,” a presentation in which our guide would explain, before we ever took the first step, what we were about to experience.

The briefing wasn't long. The guide started by showing us a video depicting an aerial flyby of the trail we were going to hike, then a fly-around of the whole Everest massif—a U-shaped trio of mountains including Lohtse (the fourth-highest mountain in the world), Nuptse (the twenty-second), and of course Everest itself. He told us about the places we'd visit through the course of the trek and explained the fascinating aspects of each one—the Lukla airport, commonly said to be the most dangerous in the world; the mountainside town of Namche Bazaar, gateway to the high Himalayas and home to the highest and remotest Irish pub on the planet; the little village of Khumjung, which displays what the monks there claim is a real yeti scalp but which the villagers themselves will tell you is just a yak butt; Tengboche Monastery, built over a hundred years ago on a ridge that provides hikers with breathtaking panoramic views of the Khumbu region; and Base Camp itself, a tiny village of brightly colored tents huddled at the foot of the massive Mount Everest and inhabited by the tiny group of (let's be honest) slightly crazy people who would be headed to the summit on the very days we were there.

I listened with utter fascination not only to my guide's descriptions of these fantastic places I was soon to see, but also to the

Introduction

smaller asides he made throughout the meeting. “When we land at Lukla, notice how the plane doesn’t really descend; the runway is at ten thousand feet, so the plane will just kind of *hit* it.” “You need to eat carbs and drink water like crazy, because they help with acclimatization.” “When we’re passing through the rhododendron forests, look for children hiding up in the trees; it’s a game to them, and they like to give flowers to tourists who notice them.” “Respect the Sherpas who pass by us with enormous loads on their backs; essentially every item needed for human survival in the high Himalayas has to be brought in on foot, and to huff it all in on their backs is how these people make a living.”

When the briefing was finished, I was stoked for the trek to start. I didn’t sleep all night. I just lay in the bed with images and words from that meeting rolling around in my mind’s eye. It was an incredible presentation, hyping the trip and giving vital information. But I’ll be honest—looking back on it now, I had no idea just how important the briefing would turn out to be for shaping the entire experience. What the guide conveyed—the information, the maps, the geography, the images, the history and cultural background of the region—threw the entire two-week trek into 3D for me. At any given moment, I *knew where I was* on the trail, and I knew where we were going. When we got to Namche Bazaar, I understood why that town was so important, and I was able to appreciate it all the more because of it. When I saw a sign for Khumjung, I smiled because I remembered, “Oh, this is where I’m supposed to look for the yeti scalp!” Even more, I avoided making mistakes: I ate carbs and drank water; I made way for heavy-burdened Sherpas and took a silent moment to respect them for making human civilization possible this far up

Introduction

in the Himalaya. The briefing hadn't been long, but it had been crucial. It changed and deepened and enriched my experience of the Himalayas in ways I never would have guessed.

You probably didn't pick up this particular book because you have an interest in mountaineering. But I tell you that story about the briefing in that rain-pelted hotel in Kathmandu because that's essentially what I'm aiming to do with this book—give you a briefing about what you're going to see, what you're going to experience, what you should look for and look *out* for as you set off on the long trek of reading the entire Bible.

A trek. That's exactly what it is when you decide to read the entire Bible. After all, it's sixty-six different books with thirty-some different authors, written over the course of a millennium and a half. And it's long—almost 1,200 chapters and three-quarters of a million words, meaning that if you decided to read the entire thing aloud, all at once, it would take you just under three days to do it—about seventy hours and forty minutes if you're an average-speed reader. Moreover, the Bible contains many different kinds of literature. There's poetry and narrative, lists and genealogies, biographies and law codes and prophecies and sermons and open letters and personal letters and even something called “apocalyptic.” It's no wonder so many people feel bewildered when they open up the Bible and attempt to read it. Actually, most people do pretty well through Genesis and the first part of Exodus. But once Exodus starts launching into Old Testament Law and doesn't really come up for air for a book and a half, that's when many

Introduction

people start thinking, “Wow, life’s gotten busy! Maybe I’ll give this another try next week . . . or month . . . or year.”

I think the key to reading the Bible, though, is to understand that all of those authors and books—all 1,189 chapters of them—are actually working together to tell one overarching, mind-blowing story about God’s action to save human beings from their high-handed rebellion against him, and from the effects and consequences of that rebellion. And the thing is, the story of how he did that is quite literally *epic* in its scope and its sweep. Wars between angels rage in the spiritual realm, while on earth kingdoms rise and fall, empires clash, cities are built and destroyed, priests perform sacrifices, and prophets point their bony fingers to the future. And in the end, a great throne is toppled and a great crown falls to the ground, only to be given finally to one thirty-year-old man—a subjugated peasant from a conquered nation—whom God enthrones over the entire world as the one who alone can and does offer mercy to rebels. If there’s ever been an epic story told in the history of mankind, this one is it!

Maybe you’ve read epic stories before, stories so sweeping in their enormity, in the comprehensiveness of the world they build, that you feel not so much like you’re reading the story from the outside as that you are actually a part of it. And when it comes to an end, when you get to the last chapter, you hesitate to read it because you know you’re about to have to leave this world you’ve been so immersed in. I felt that way when I read Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* for the first time. I—a self-assured, cocky college freshman—cried when the book was over, because the world Tolkien had created, the story he wove, had captured my imagination and pulled me entirely into it. Its themes, its rhythms, its poetry

Introduction

and prose, the arc of despair giving way to hope—by the end, I wasn't just *reading* that story; I was *in* it, living it, experiencing it.

Imagine, though, if I had read *The Lord of the Rings* like most people tend to read the Bible. Imagine if I'd taken *Rings*, opened it to a random place and read the first sentence or two my eyes landed on. Sure, there might have been some beauty in it; I might have been able to “get something out of it” immediately; there might have been some “life application” to be had. But that kind of reading would have been empty, vacant, and lifeless compared to reaching that same paragraph with the full weight of the story behind it. Or imagine if I read *The Lord of the Rings* with the main questions in my mind being “What does this mean for me? How can this help me be a better person? What lessons can I learn from this?” Again, you might wind up learning some important things reading the book like that, but you'd be fundamentally misunderstanding the story's aim. You'd be reading it in a fundamentally self-centered and far too self-aware way, when the aim of the story is really to sweep you away in the narrative, to carry you along in a story in which *you* are not the starring character but in which the idea is to fall in love with *other* characters. That's how epic stories are meant to be read—not as tiny little morality tales, but as horizon-busting, eye-bugging, world-broadening, even life-shaping *experiences*.

One more example: imagine reading *The Lord of the Rings* out of order. You pick it up, flip over to Rivendell for a moment, then hop over to Mordor before slamming back into the Shire; maybe you decide to read half of Tom Bombadil's song the next day, and then end it up with a little bit of Shelob's Lair. Now, if you've read the story from start to finish once or twice already,

Introduction

that might be lots of fun—reading your favorite parts over again. But it's no way to understand the story of *The Lord of the Rings*! And it's no way to understand the epic story of the Bible either, even though the hop-skip-and-jump method of reading is the one I think most Christians try to employ most of the time. When my daughter was about six years old, I asked what she learned in Sunday school one Sunday, and she replied, "Abraham died for Jesus's sins on the ark, and then King Josiah raised him from the dead!" If you read the Bible the way most of us tend to—and in the order most of us tend to—you might be thinking that's actually not a terrible summary of the story!

But of course we know it *is* terrible, don't we? That's not the story, and that's not how the Bible should be read—not out of order, not as a bunch of little morality tales, certainly not with ourselves and our concerns at the center of our consciousness of it—but rather as the sweepingly epic story of God's heroic rescue of mankind from our deadly rebellion against him. That's what I hope this book will help you learn to do.

You can think of reading the Bible as a trek through the Himalayas and this book as the briefing meeting, just like the one I had in Kathmandu, before you set out on the trek. My hope here is to do several things.¹ I want to introduce you to some of the things you're going to see and experience as you read the entire Bible. I want to point out some things you should watch for—beautiful things that you might otherwise miss and dangerous things that you should be on guard against. I want to tell you

1 I preached on this topic at T4G 2020. Text of the full sermon is available "A T4G 2020 Sermon: What Is and Isn't the Gospel" on the 9Marks website, <https://www.9marks.org/>.

Introduction

about the various kinds of terrain you're going to traverse, that is, the different genres of literature you're going to be reading, and I want to help you begin to understand the unique skills and rules you're going to need to keep in mind in order to traverse that terrain without, well, breaking your literary ankles. But maybe above all, I want to get you excited for the trek. I want you not to be able to sleep tonight, knowing what's waiting for you out there. I want your heart to be full of expectation and eagerness for what you're about to see as you begin to read and experience this grand, epic story that is the Bible.

So let's start the briefing . . . by getting some basic facts about the trail.

What the Bible Is, and Where It Came From

NEPAL IS A COUNTRY in South Asia, situated just to the north-east of India in the heart of the Himalayan Mountains. It's not a large country—only about the size of Arkansas—but it boasts a population of almost 30 million. The flag of Nepal is the only one in the world that's not in the shape of a quadrilateral. Instead, it looks like two triangles fused together and is meant to represent the mountains and their importance to the history and culture of the nation. The vast majority of the people are Hindu in religion and culture, and most of the rest are Buddhist. The most popular dish—eaten by some of the people for all three meals—is a lentil and rice mixture called *dal bhat*. Both hearty and cheap, it has the benefit of leaving both the stomach and the wallet feeling relatively full. Nepal also boasts the world's largest elevation change, from just above sea level at the Tarai Plains to the highest point on the entire planet, Everest's 29,032-foot summit. Strangely, Nepal's

clocks aren't set to any normal time zone; my home in Louisville wasn't nine or ten hours off, but rather *nine hours and forty-five minutes off!* I never learned exactly why that is, but so much for trying to figure out what time it was back home.

All these facts I learned in the days and weeks running up to my trip to Nepal, and also during the twenty-two-hour series of flights I had to take to get there. In one way or another, all of those facts were important for the trip I was about to take. They taught me something about the nation's culture, its history, and its geography. Just by knowing a few basic and interesting facts about Nepal, I was able to orient myself to what I was about to experience. I knew, for example, that *dal bhat* was not to be missed. I knew I'd be encountering Hindu and Buddhist religious practices, and sometimes even a syncretistic mixture of the two of them. And I knew it would be entirely fruitless for me to schedule phone calls with anybody back in the States.

Anytime you're about to visit a new country or set off on a journey, it's a good idea to get some basic facts about the place you're going. What's its character? Its history? Where did it come from and what are you likely to encounter there? Without a doubt the same thing is true when you're setting off on a journey of reading through the entire Bible. After all, for all of us here in the twenty-first century, we are headed to a time and place that is almost completely foreign to us. The customs are different, the history is largely unknown to us, and even the kinds of literature and writing that make it up can strike us as unfamiliar and downright strange.

So before we dive into the deep end, let's take a few moments to get familiar with the Bible at the highest level—not its storyline;

we'll get to that in the next chapter. Let's look at its even more basic structure, the most fundamental facts about what it is and where it came from.

At its most fundamental level—before we even get to what Christians believe about it being the word of God—the Bible is a collection of sixty-six different books written by thirty-some different authors over the span of some fifteen hundred years, the last of which was completed about two thousand years ago. It was written in three different languages—Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic—and in the English Standard Version it contains 757,349 words, about 30 percent longer than Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. If you sat down to read the Bible from cover to cover at a normal out-loud reading pace, it would take you just under seventy-two hours to do.

In reality, to call the sixty-six books of the Bible “books” is a little misleading. For the most part, they're not books in the sense that this book you're reading is a *book*. Some of them are, to be sure, but many of the books of the Bible are . . . other things. They're poems or letters or sermons or songbooks or collections of sayings. Though that may sound daunting at first—especially if we're trying to learn how to read the Bible as one sweeping story—I think this variety imbues the Bible with an extra layer of fascination and mystery.

In 2007, author Max Brooks wrote a fictional work called *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War*. It wasn't your normal everyday novel, running from start to finish with prose written from the standpoint of a third-person author or even from the standpoint of one of the main characters. Instead, Brooks told his story by switching back and forth between various literary types—a journal entry, then an email, then a list of

supplies, and on and on. It made for a fascinating story because as a reader you constantly had to be reading between the lines in order to catch the deepest themes of the story. In many ways the Bible works in the same way. Some of its story is told in prose, but that prose is then augmented by prophecies and songs, letters and memoirs. And as the story builds and grows, its themes rolling and swelling forward, you see it come to life in a way you never would if it were a straight-line prose narrative.

Of course, one of the benefits Max Brooks had in writing his *World War Z* was that he had 100 percent authority to include in his book anything he thought would push the story forward. If he wanted to include a grocery list, in went the grocery list! Email? Done! If he'd even wanted to include something utterly unrelated to the story—a birthday card from his mom—who would have been able to tell him not to? (An editor. That's who. But that's not my point.) My point is that Max Brooks, as the singular author of his book, got to decide what to put in his book. If that's true, then who exactly made those decisions when it came to the Bible? Who decided that *this* prophetic book should go into it, but not that one? These four accounts of the life of Jesus, but not that one? This letter, but not those over there?

The answer to that question isn't as easy as it is for some other books. For *World War Z*, the answer is five words long: Max Brooks and his editor. For most books, in fact, the answer is about that simple. But for the Bible, not so much. The trouble, though, is that people really *want* there to be such a simple answer to the question of who got to decide what to put in the Bible. Surely, they think, there must have been a council of bishops at some point—or maybe a Roman emperor—who just decided which

books would be part of the Bible and which would not. And of course the dark undercurrent of that thought is that, surely, they must have made that decision in order to hide other books that would be detrimental to their plans—whatever those plans might have been!

That was basically the story Dan Brown told in his 2003 book *The Da Vinci Code*. I'll be honest; I liked that book. I have liked most of Dan Brown's novels because I'm a sucker for page-turning, mostly mindless action stories with just enough faux highbrow intellectualism to make me think I'm learning something. Guilty as charged! What set *The Da Vinci Code* apart from Brown's other books, though, was that so many people around the world seemed to forget that it was *fiction*. People (and news organizations, embarrassingly) started acting as if its central "truth"—that Jesus survived, got married, had children, and even had living descendants—was actually true. And a big part of that story, necessary to it in fact, was the idea that the Bible as we know it was a central part of the conspiracy. Here's how the story went: Powerful early Christians knew that Jesus didn't actually die on the cross, rise from the dead, and ascend into heaven; they knew that he really settled down into domestic life, had some kids, and lived well into old age. But of course those "facts" would be unfortunate for their project of using the fictional Jesus they'd constructed to build a new religion and make themselves wealthy and powerful. So they just buried the facts. They picked a few books that backed up their fictional account of Jesus, suppressed other writings that undermined it, and presented their "Bible" to the world: "Here it is! Behold the canon!"

Dan Brown actually places the blame for all of this at the feet of Emperor Constantine; the bishops were just his cronies

apparently. Here's one account Brown has his characters give of where the Bible came from:

“Who chose which gospels to include?” Sophie asked.

“Aha!” Teabing burst in with enthusiasm. “The fundamental irony of Christianity! The Bible, as we know it today, was collated by the pagan Roman emperor Constantine the Great.”¹

Of course that's absolute historical nonsense; it's fiction, as much fiction as the rest of Brown's book. But to be fair to him, at least Brown says, on the very first page of his work, that his book is fiction. The real tragedy is that so many people—even scholars—have embraced this sneering-emperor-and-his-cronies account of how the Bible was put together as *fact*. That's a tragedy because it's just not true. So if it wasn't some group of people deciding which books to include and which to reject, how then did it happen? Let's start with the Old Testament. Where did it come from?

The idea of a list of writings that would be accepted by the Jewish people as authoritative undoubtedly began with the tablets of stone on which God wrote the Ten Commandments and then gave to the people. Exodus 31:18 tells us that these tablets were “written with the finger of God,” and therefore were treated with the utmost respect and reverence. Moses says in Deuteronomy 10:5 that he placed the tablets inside the ark of the covenant, which God had commanded him to make. As time passed, other writings from Jewish leaders were afforded this same level of re-

1 Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York, Anchor Books, 2003), 303–4.

spect. Moses's writings were placed beside the ark of the covenant (Deut. 31:24–26), and Joshua—Moses's successor—is said to have written his account of the conquest of the Promised Land “in the book of the Law of God” (Josh. 24:26). Over the centuries, other people in Israel's history were recognized as ones who spoke the very words of God, and their words too were included among those writings which were seen as absolutely authoritative. So Samuel wrote his words and “laid it up before the Lord” (1 Sam. 10:25); David's acts were written down in the chronicles of three “seers” or prophets (1 Chron. 29:29); and the Lord himself commanded Jeremiah to write down his words in a book (Jer. 30:2).

Of course there were debates among Jewish scholars about whether certain books deserved to be included in this “canon”—or standard—of authoritative books. The books of Esther and Song of Songs, for instance, didn't even mention God's name; should they be included as authoritative Scripture for the nation? What about Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, whose wisdom seems so counterintuitive at times? (Should we answer a fool according to his folly, or not [Prov. 26:4–5]? Is there really nothing better than to eat and drink and find enjoyment in our work [Eccles. 2:24], and do we really want to teach our children that “money solves everything [Eccles. 10:19]?). By about 435 BC, though, the canon of the Old Testament seems to have solidified and the debates to have ended. After that date (the approximate date of the book of Malachi), nothing more was added to the canon. It was closed.²

2 Several ancient sources attest to the closing of the canon after 435 BC. First Maccabees 4, for example, acknowledges several times that at the time of the Maccabean revolt, there were no prophets in Israel and had not been any for quite some time. Josephus, writing his *Against Apion* at about the turn of the first century AD, said that although

Most importantly, the New Testament documents make it clear that Jesus himself left no question that the canon of the Old Testament was well-defined and closed. In several places he even says things that embrace—in an exclusive kind of way—the entire collection of books. For example, in Luke 24:44–45, Jesus teaches his disciples that everything that had happened to him was the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy: “‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.’ Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.”

There are a couple of interesting things to see here. First, notice that “the Scriptures” is synonymous with what Jesus calls “the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms.” By the time Jesus was born, the Hebrew Scriptures were regularly talked about as having three divisions—the Law (*Torah*), the Prophets (*Nevi'im*), and the Writings (*Ketuvim*). So ingrained had that division become, in fact, that a single word was invented to refer to the whole collection; using the first letter of each of those Hebrew words, the whole canon was called the *TaNaKh*. What’s interesting about Jesus’s words in Luke 24:44 is that he refers to all three of those divisions. True, he doesn’t specifically mention the Writings like he does the Law and the Prophets, but the Psalms were the first book of the Writings and therefore probably could stand for the

other histories of the Jewish people had been lately written, none of those had been “deemed worthy of equal credit with the earlier records, because of the failure of the exact succession of the prophets.” Maccabees, Josephus, rabbinic literature, and even the Qumran community all agree: after 435 BC and the prophecy of Malachi, no other books were added by the Jewish people to their canon of authoritative Scripture.

whole division. See the point? Jesus himself recognized the accepted canon of Old Testament Scripture, embracing all three divisions of the entire Tanakh.

This fact is underscored further by something Jesus said in Luke 11:51. At that particular moment, Jesus is launching an absolute scorcher of a diatribe against the Jewish Pharisees and teachers of the Law. One of the lawyers interrupts him and complains that Jesus is insulting him and his kind. Undeterred, Jesus doubles down, declaring that this lawyer and the other Jewish leaders will be held accountable by God for all the blood of the prophets that they have spilled since the beginning of time. Here's what he says:

Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, "I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute," so that the blood of all the prophets, shed from the foundation of the world, may be charged against this generation, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, it will be required of this generation. (Luke 11:49–51)

Now obviously this isn't the main point we should take away from what Jesus says here, but look carefully at that phrase "from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah." What does that mean? The key to understanding it is to know that the Jewish people ordered the books of the Old Testament differently than we do, the most important difference being that the very last book of the Hebrew Scriptures was not Malachi but 2 Chronicles, the end of which tells the story of the martyrdom of Zechariah, son of Jehoiada the priest. But there's the kicker: Zechariah was

not the last prophet to be killed *chronologically speaking*. That was Uriah some three hundred years later, whose story is told in Jeremiah 26. But *canonically speaking*, Jesus's words embrace the entire Tanakh as the Jews ordered it—from the blood of Abel the first martyr in Genesis 4:8 to the blood of Zechariah the last martyr written about in 2 Chronicles 24:20–22. Again, the point is clear: by the time of Jesus, the Hebrew Scriptures were a well-established collection of authoritative writings, composed of three well-recognized divisions ordered from Genesis to 2 Chronicles. And what is more, Jesus *endorsed* that collection from start to finish as being the written word of God.³

So we know that the Old Testament was formed over the centuries through a process of the Jewish people recognizing books that came with prophetic authority and were in accord with what they knew to be the written word of God (beginning with the tablets and the words of Moses himself). The New Testament was formed through a similar process, but faster. From the very beginning, the early Christians knew that Jesus had given a special authority to the apostles—those who were eyewitnesses of his resurrection and had been *personally* called and sent by him—to speak his words to the fledgling church. This knowledge came from an occasion just before his death during which Jesus specifically gave his apostles this kind of authority. John eventually recorded what happened:

[Jesus said,] “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his

³ For more information about the formation of the biblical canon, see F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018).

own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.” (John 16:12–15)

That’s a really extraordinary event, isn’t it? Jesus promises his apostles that once he has risen from the dead and ascended to heaven, he will send the Holy Spirit to speak Jesus’s words to his apostles, and then they in turn will (presumably) speak it to others. In other words, Jesus is giving his apostles a special authority and commission to speak in his name, and enjoining those who would follow him (Christians!) to accept what they say as his very words. As the years passed following the resurrection, it’s clear that the apostles took this commission of authority very seriously; they believed *and asserted* that what they were writing was Scripture. So for example, in 1 Corinthians 14:37 Paul says, “If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord.” In 1 Thessalonians 2:13 he says of his own preaching and writing, “And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God.” In Revelation 1:3, John makes a similar claim for his own book: “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.”

It wasn’t just that the apostles regarded their *own* writings as authoritative, either; they also recognized the writings of the other

apostles as being Scripture. The most interesting example of this is also the most amusing. In 2 Peter 3:15–16, Peter writes this:

And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.

The funny thing here, of course, is that Peter himself recognizes that Paul's writing can be hard to understand sometimes. But the most important phrase Peter uses when talking about people twisting Paul's writings is "as they do the other Scriptures." The *other* Scriptures! In other words, Peter puts Paul's writings on the same level as the Old Testament canon.

Do you see the point of this? The development of the New Testament canon was never a matter of any group of Christians sitting down before a table of hundreds and hundreds of documents and having to (or getting to) choose which ones would be included in the collection. Rather, the early Christians knew that Jesus had specially authorized his exclusive group of apostles to speak for him, and those apostles repeatedly asserted their own acceptance of that authority. So when a church received a letter or account of the life of Jesus that could be authenticated as genuinely written by one of those apostles (or, as in the case of Luke for example, so close an associate of one of the apostles that it could basically be said that the author was speaking *for* that apostle), and when its contents could be seen to line up with what Christians already

knew to be true and to be of general benefit to Christians across the world, those letters or accounts of Jesus's life were accepted as authoritative.

To be sure, there were debates about what belonged and what didn't. Challenges arose when a book was put forward for acceptance, or an accepted book was singled out as not belonging. In those cases, the early Christians had to do some careful thinking, and over the years they informally and organically developed a series of tests by which they would determine if a particular document should be accepted as part of the canon. The four tests were: apostolicity, antiquity, universality, and orthodoxy. All four of those tests were actually written down in the late second century in a document known as "the Muratorian Canon," but they were in use long before that. The point of the Muratorian Canon is not to suggest those tests as a new method, but rather to say, essentially, "This is how we've been thinking through this for a long time." Simply put, the test of *apostolicity* meant that the early Christians were recognizing the authority Jesus had given to his apostles to speak his word; if you weren't an apostle (or at least a close associate of one), then your book didn't have a snowball's chance in the Mediterranean region of being accepted. *Antiquity* was similar; if your book was written, say, in the late third century, then it wouldn't be accepted because all the apostles were dead and gone by then. *Universality* meant that books of a very specific nature, or books that were used only by a small subsection of the universal church, weren't eligible for inclusion; the words Jesus would speak to his apostles for use by the church would be useful for the *whole* church. Finally, *orthodoxy* meant that the writings included in the canon would have to match up

with what Christians already knew to be true about Jesus. For example, Christians knew beyond a shadow of doubt that Jesus rose from the dead, so any book (even if it had, say, Peter's name on it) that claimed otherwise would be immediately rejected.

So you see? There was no council of bishops or imperial edict that arbitrarily, much less maliciously, decided which books would be in the canon. The early Christians simply *received* the words of the apostles as authoritative, just as Jesus had told them to in that moment recorded in John 16, and then when challenges or questions arose from one direction or another, they used very well thought through criteria—apostolicity, antiquity, universality, and orthodoxy—to adjudicate those questions. I mean, stop and think about it for a minute: If it were up to you, what other criteria would you use? Given what Jesus said in John 16, can you think of a better way to determine which books you would accept as authoritative than what they came up with? “We will receive those books which are written by apostles or their secretaries, which are of benefit to the whole of Jesus’s people throughout the world, and which match up with what we already know to be true.” That’s what they said, and if you ask me, that seems like a pretty good and reasonable set of tests.

Ultimately, Christians believe that the Bible is the written word of God. There are many reasons for that belief, among which is the Bible’s own claim to that status. The apostles’ repeated assertions that their own writings, and those of the other apostles, carry that kind of authority falls into that category. So does John’s claim about his Revelation, and his unapologetic declaration in 1 John 4:6 that “we are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us.” Most importantly,

though, Christians believe the Bible is the word of God because Jesus believed that. As we've seen, from start to finish he—the resurrected one—endorsed the Old Testament and authorized the New. That's why we believe it.

But here's the thing: even if you're not a Christian (yet), and even if you're not ready to go all the way and agree that the Bible is the word of God, don't be too quick to reject it. Even when considered to be just historical artifacts, the collection of books we're talking about here is extraordinary. Sixty-six books, thirty-five authors, fifteen hundred years—all (I hope you'll come to see) collectively and harmoniously telling one epic story of God's relationship with humankind, a story that culminated in a single saving act so unexpected, so breathtaking, that it permanently changed the course of human history.

That's the story you're about to be immersed in as you begin this journey of reading the Bible. It won't be short; it won't be easy; but it will be worth the trek. So let's take a look at the trail ahead.