part one

WHOSE BIBLE IS IT ANYWAY?

The Devil can cite scripture for his own purpose.
—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, 
THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

The Bible has noble poetry in it; and some clever fables; and some blood-drenched history; and a wealth of obscenity; and upwards of a thousand lies.
—MARK TWAIN, 
LETTERS FROM THE EARTH

...what is it to me if Moses wrote it or if another prophet wrote it, since the words of all of them are truth and through prophecy.
—FIFTEENTH-CENTURY SCHOLAR JOSEPH BEN ELIEZER BONFILS
* What is the Bible?

* What’s a “testament”?

* Are the Dead Sea Scrolls the “original” Bible?

* Who wrote the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament?

  * Didn’t Moses write the Torah?

  * If not Moses, then who?

  * Who were the Children of Israel?

* If they wrote it in Hebrew, where did all the Greek words come from?
M y Bible or yours? Whose version shall we read? The King James? The Jerusalem Bible? The Living Bible?
Take a look at this brief passage from one Bible story as told in a version called The Five Books of Moses:

The human knew Havva his wife, 
she became pregnant and bore Kayin. 
She said: 
*Kaniti* /I-have-gotten 
a man, as has YHWH! 
She continued bearing—his brother, Hevel. 
Now Hevel became a shepherd of flocks, and Kayin became 
a worker of the soil.

Havva? Kayin? Hevel? 
“Who are these strangers?” you might ask.

Perhaps you know them better as Eve and her boys, Cain and Abel, whose births are recounted in Genesis. In Everett Fox’s The Five Books of Moses you will also encounter Yaakov, Yosef, and Moshe. Again, you might recognize them more easily as Jacob, Joseph, and Moses. In this recently published translation of the Bible’s first five books, Dr. Fox attempts to recapture the sound and rhythms of ancient Hebrew poetry, to re-create the feeling of this ancient saga as it was sung around desert campfires by nomadic herders some three thousand years ago. In doing so, Fox makes the comfortably familiar seem foreign. All of those artmuseum paintings depicting a nubile, blond, blue-eyed European Eve holding an apple simply don’t jibe with the image Fox conjures—of a primitive earth mother from a starkly different time and place. His unexpected presentation underscores a startling fact about the book we all claim to respect and honor: there is no one Bible. There are many Bibles. A stroll through any bookstore demonstrates that reality. You’ll see Jewish Bibles, Catholic Bibles, African-American Bibles, “nonsexist” Bibles, “Husband’s Bibles,” and “Recovery Bibles” designed for those in twelve-step pro
grams. Then there’s the *Living Bible*—as opposed to the Dead Bible?—and *The Good News Bible*, both written in contemporary language. So far there is no “Valley Girl” or “Baywatch” Bible. Give it time.

So how to choose? The King James Version is still the most popular translation of all. But God, Moses, and Jesus didn’t really speak the King’s English, and all of those “thees” and “thous” and verbs ending in “eth” are confusing and tough on anyone with a lisp. The New Revised Standard Version is clear and readable, but it lacks poetic sweep. Then there are dozens of other versions, each proclaiming its superiority, some claiming to be more faithful to the “original” version. It brings to mind the words of the world-weary philosopher in the biblical book of Ecclesiastes: “Of making many books there is no end.”

What would old “Ecclesiastes” say if he walked into a bookstore? Do too many translations spoil the biblical stew? This question lies at the heart of so much popular confusion about the Bible. We can’t agree on a version. So how can we can agree on what it says?

Where did this Flood of Bibles come from? How did such an important document come to be so many different things to so many different people? Or as the English poet William Blake put it nearly two hundred years ago:

> Both read the Bible day and night,  
> But thou read’st black where I read white.

All of these queries lead back to one very simple first question:

**What is the Bible?**

Most people think of the Bible as a book, like a long and complicated novel with too many oddly named characters and not enough plot. Pick up a Bible. Hold it in your hand. No question about it.
It is a “book.” But it is vastly more. The word “Bible” comes from the medieval Latin *biblia*, a singular word derived from the Greek *biblia*, meaning “books.” To add to this little word history: the city of Byblos was an ancient Phoenician coastal city in what is now Lebanon. The Phoenicians invented the alphabet we still use and taught the Greeks how to write. From Byblos, the Phoenicians exported the papyrus “paper” on which early “books” were written. (Papyrus is actually a reedlike plant; strips of the plant were soaked and woven together. When dried, they formed a writing “paper.”) While *byblos* originally meant “papyrus” in Greek, it eventually came to mean “book,” and books are therefore named after this city.

So, in the most literal sense, the Bible is not a single book but an anthology, a collection of many small books. In an even broader sense, it is not just an anthology of shorter works but an entire library. You might think of a library as a physical place, but it can also mean a collection of books. And the Bible is an extraordinary gathering of many books of law, wisdom, poetry, philosophy, and history, some of them four thousand years old. How many books this portable library contains depends on which Bible you are clutching. The Bible of a Jew is different from the Bible of a Roman Catholic, which is different from the Bible of a Protestant.

Written over the course of a thousand years, primarily in ancient Hebrew, the Jewish Bible is the equivalent of Christianity’s Old Testament. For Jews, there is no New Testament. They recognize only those Scriptures that Christians call the Old Testament. Both the Jewish Bible and Christian Old Testament contain the same books, although arranged and numbered in a slightly different order. Unless you hold the Jerusalem Bible, popular among Roman Catholics; it contains about a dozen books that Jews and Protestants don’t consider “Holy Scripture.” But that’s another story, one that comes a little later in the Bible’s history. In Jewish traditions, their Bible is also called the Tanakh, an acronym of the Hebrew words *Torah* (for “law” or “teaching”), *Nevi’im* (“the Prophets”) and *Kethuvim* (“the Writings”). These are the
three broad divisions into which the thirty-nine books of Hebrew scripture are organized.

**BOOKS OF THE HEBREW BIBLE OR OLD TESTAMENT**

**TANAKH** The order of the books of Hebrew scriptures

**TORAH**
- Genesis
- Exodus
- Leviticus
- Numbers
- Deuteronomy

**PROPHETS**
- Joshua
- Judges
- First Samuel
- Second Samuel
- First Kings
- Second Kings
- Isaiah
- Jeremiah
- Ezekiel
- Hosea
- Joel
- Amos
- Obadiah
- Jonah
- Micah
- Nahum
- Habakkuk
- Zephaniah
- Haggai
Zechariah
Malachi

WRITINGS
Psalms
Proverbs
Job
The Song of Songs (Song of Solomon)
Ruth
Lamentations
Ecclesiastes
Esther
Daniel
Ezra
Nehemiah
First Chronicles
Second Chronicles

KING JAMES VERSION The standard order of the Old Testament books in most Christian Bibles

Genesis
Exodus
Leviticus
Numbers
Deuteronomy
Joshua
Judges
Ruth
1 Samuel
2 Samuel
1 Kings
2 Kings
1 Chronicles
These thirty-nine books lay out the law, traditions, and history of the Jewish people and their unique relationship with their God. Starting “In the beginning,” with the very Creation of “the heavens and earth,” these thirty-nine books follow the lives of the ancient founders of the Jewish faith—the Patriarchs and the Matriarchs—and recount the story of the people of ancient Israel in good times and bad. While many of us recall childhood stories of
such Israelite heroes as Abraham, Moses, Joshua, and David, the true centerpiece of these books is the code of divine laws primarily laid out in the first five books, or Torah, that both Jews and Christians believe was given by God to the prophet Moses more than three thousand years ago. Far more than just the familiar Ten Commandments—at least, they should be familiar—these laws regulated every aspect of Jewish religious and daily life, and provide the core of that “Judeo-Christian ethic” everybody’s always talking about.

For Christians, who worship the same One God of Judaism, this Old Testament is a significant part of their religion and traditions, but it is only part of the story. Because their Bible also includes a “second act” or sequel, the New Testament, which tells the story of Jesus, a man Christians believe was the son of God. Its twenty-seven additional books recount how Jesus’ followers, most of them devout Jewish men and women, established the Christian church just about two thousand years ago.

But this quick, literal answer to the basic question of what the Bible is dodges the main issue. Some people would confidently reply that the Bible is the divinely inspired word of God, given to human-kind through God’s prophets. In other words, God dictated these Bible books word for word to men in his divine “stenography pool.”

Centuries of research into the Bible presents a far more complicated picture: the Bible is the culmination of an extended process—covered with centuries of inky human fingerprints—of storytelling, writing, cutting and pasting, translating, and interpreting. That process began about four thousand years ago, and involved many writers working at different times—a fact that may still come as a distinct surprise to a good many readers.
What’s a “testament”? 

If the Bible really starts out as a Jewish document, and they don’t call it a “testament,” where does that word come from? And what does it mean? 

The word “testament” has come to mean several things. Most people prefer to put off thinking about the word when it comes to that unpleasantness, your “last will and testament.” In this strictly legal sense, it means a document providing for the disposal of your earthly goods after you die. 

Another common use for “testament” is as evidence of something—for instance, “The Holocaust is testament to Hitler’s evil.” 

But the old way in which the word was used to describe these holy writings meant something quite different. “Testament” was another word for “covenant”—meaning an agreement, contract, or pact. For Christians, the Old Testament represented the ancient deal or “covenant” struck between God and his people. In the New Testament, however, Christians think they got a “New Deal” through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. 

Many Christians think that this means they can simply throw out the old books and stick with the new, or skip over all that long, boring “old stuff.” But the New Testament does not replace the Old. To Christians, it supplements, expands, and completes that “old contract.” In the sports world, they call it a contract extension; the old agreement is renewed with more profitable terms. 

Jesus himself was familiar with the “old contract.” He was a good Jewish boy who studied the Torah, Prophets, and Writings. He could cite them by heart when he was twelve. Of course, Jesus wouldn’t have possessed a Bible to study his lessons. When he was a boy, there was no “Bible.” Books didn’t exist. More likely he would have learned by rote from scrolls kept by local religious teachers, or “rabbis.” The ancient books of Hebrew later collected
as the Bible were written on papyrus or leather, stitched together, and rolled into long scrolls. Until recently, the oldest known copies of Hebrew scrolls came from medieval times, around the year 1000. Then fifty years ago a Bedouin boy scrounging around some caves in the desert wastelands near the Dead Sea made an intriguing and startling discovery.

**Are the Dead Sea Scrolls the “original” Bible?**

In the spring of 1947, while the British still controlled Palestine, Muhammed ed Dib was tending goats in the arid, rocky hills near the northern Dead Sea shore. The “Dead Sea” is actually a salty lake in the middle of a desert, the lowest point on the face of the earth, and one of the hottest and least inviting landscapes in the world. The fresh water flowing into it evaporates rapidly in the heat, leaving behind a thick mineral broth. Fish can’t live in these waters—hence a “Dead Sea.” In the hills that surround the Dead Sea, the young goatherd dropped a stone into a cave and heard it hit something. Investigating further, he came across ancient clay pots filled with scrolls and scraps of old leather covered in mysterious writing. His accidental find was the beginning of one of the most momentous, and controversial, discoveries in history: that of the “Dead Sea Scrolls.”

Muhammed’s find launched a wider search of the surrounding area, generally called Qumran, approximately ten miles south of Jericho, on a plateau overlooking the Dead Sea. After the initial discovery sent amateurs crawling all over these rocky hills, scurrying to find more scrolls, an orderly archaeological search of Qumran was eventually organized. Over the years, many more scrolls and remnants of scrolls were uncovered. Fifty years after that first find, researchers are still trying to piece together all of the tiny bits and pieces of leather fragments preserved by the dry desert air.

The painstaking work of sorting through these fragile old
leather scraps, a massive ancient jigsaw puzzle with no picture to work form, has stirred controversy. Set against the politics and intrigue of recent Middle East wars and history, the work proceeded in secret and very slowly. Too slowly for some critics, who saw a giant conspiracy to keep the world from learning some extraordinary truth. But even from the earliest days of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, as news of their contents trickled out, it was clear that these ancient scrolls included some of the oldest known texts of the Hebrew Bible ever found.

Written in both Hebrew and Aramaic—a Syrian language closely related to Hebrew, and the language spoken by Jesus—more than two hundred biblical documents have been found; some are almost complete, others are in fragments. The scrolls contain at least a portion of every book of the Hebrew Bible, except the book of Esther. Among the scrolls is a complete “book” of Isaiah, composed of seventeen separate pieces of leather stitched together to form a roll nearly twenty-five feet long. Sophisticated dating techniques have proven that some of these scrolls were written nearly three hundred years before Jesus was born. Others came from Jesus’ own lifetime, a turbulent period in ancient Palestine when Rome controlled a contentious, rebellious Jewish people.

Besides these bits and pieces of the Bible, the scrolls also contained other ancient books that are not in our Bibles. There was also a great deal of information about the people who had copied and hidden these scrolls away in these Qumran caves. Known as the “Essenes,” they were part of a Jewish sect, some of whom rejected mainstream Jewish life in Jerusalem for a monklike, celibate existence. A communal group, the Qumran Essenes adhered to strict regulations as they prepared for Judgment Day, like the Jedi Knights of Star Wars, awaiting a final battle between good and evil, the forces of light and dark.

The Dead Sea Scrolls make two facts clear. By the time Jesus was born, an official list, or “canon,” of Hebrew books in the Bible had not yet been set. And while these old books are very similar
to the Hebrew scriptures as they are known today, there were slightly different versions of some of these ancient Hebrew texts. While the scrolls from Qumran offer fascinating information about the Hebrew text of the Bible and life in first-century Palestine, they leave another big, tantalizing question unresolved.

Who wrote the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament?

A few years ago in the New York City subway system, there was a poster for a stenography school that read: “If U cn rd ths, u cn get a gd jb.”

This subway advertisement achieved instant legend status in New York. Good for late-night comedians’ laughs, it was also obscenely parodied on numerous T-shirts.

But now try this word puzzle—

“Mgn rdng ths bk wtht vwls. Sn’t tht dfclt t cmprd? Myb ftr whl y cld fl n sm f th blnks nd fg f t. Ftr ll, ts smpl nglsh. Bt nw, mgn ts prt f n ncnt lngg tht hs fln nt dss vr svrl cntrs. Tht s hw th Bbl nc pprd.”

Would you like to “buy a vowel” as they say on the popular Wheel of Fortune game show? You might get this:

“Imagine reading this book without vowels. Isn’t that difficult to comprehend? Maybe after a while you could fill in some of the blanks and figure out most of it. After all, it’s simple English. But now, imagine it’s part of an ancient language that has fallen into disuse over several centuries. That is how the Bible once appeared.”

When commencing a new year of classes in Hebrew, a famous university professor was said to tell his students, “Gentlemen, this is the language which God spoke.” The Hebrew alphabet comprises twenty-two letters, all of them consonants, a concept we find difficult to grasp. In fact, Semitic languages like Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic are still generally written without any vowels, although a system of dots and dashes above and below the line of writing
has been added in recent times. In other words, readers of classical Hebrew, versed in its oral traditions, had to provide the vowel sounds from memory. The Greeks, who borrowed the basic twenty-two-letter alphabet used in Hebrew and Phoenician, added five new letters at the end of their alphabet—so the Greeks get credit for inventing the vowel system.

Now back to the fill-in-the-blanks puzzle. Imagine that the ancient scrolls and parchments on which this mysterious passage was found are falling apart. They are written from right to left, the opposite of what most Europeans and Americans are accustomed to reading. Complicating the fact that the vowels have been left out, these scrolls are filled with the names of obscure people about whom there are no other references in history. Anyone reading these scrolls knows the text had been hand-copied after centuries of being orally transmitted from one generation to the next, just as The Iliad and The Odyssey were. And they also know that, over the centuries, older versions of the scrolls have been lost or destroyed. All in all, it is a very confusing puzzle.

With all these difficulties to consider, is it any wonder that people are confused by what the Bible says? Or that a good many people dismiss the Bible as little more than a very elaborate set of myths, like those of the ancient Greeks or King Arthur’s Round Table? Now you have some sense of what we’re up against when we talk about understanding who wrote the Bible. As Winston Churchill said about Russia in 1939: “It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.”

Many readers of the Bible still possess the “Divine Light Bulb” notion of the Bible’s composition. In this scenario, a man was sitting in his tent in the Sinai desert, when suddenly, in a glorious flash, the entire text of the Scriptures started flowing onto parchment or papyrus. Or perhaps it was whispered into his ear by an unseen spirit—Cosmic Dictation. Or the words were whirled out of some heavenly flames and carved into stone the way it was done for Charlton Heston in The Ten Commandments. As the Gershwins put it so succinctly, “It ain’t necessarily so.”
The history of the Holy Scriptures that modern Jews and Christians study is a fantastic story in itself, a tale out of an Indiana Jones movie. It is still unfolding with each new archaeological dig and discovery of an ancient scroll. Once armed with little more than pith helmets, pick and shovel, and a magnifying glass, modern researchers are now aided by satellite photographs, spectroscopes, and infrared readers that can date and analyze old parchments. Astonishing discoveries during the past few decades of great libraries of ancient writing have added immensely to our knowledge of biblical times and languages. And with the help of linguistic computers and instant communications links to vast worldwide libraries, scholars continue to unravel the secrets of the Bible.

Yet, while the depth of our knowledge grows, the answer to a basic and extraordinary question largely remains a mystery: Who wrote the Bible?

In spite of tremendous strides in scholarship and research dedicated to this question, the fact remains: no one really knows. And we will probably never know, short of some archaeological find of earthshaking significance. But it is safe to say that the King James Version familiar to most English-speaking Christians and all the other versions loading down the bookstore shelves are only recent links near the end of a long chain of troubled, sometimes badly garbled, and often conflicting translations.

This is the first blow to the plausibility of *The Bible Code*, the publishing sensation that claims that the Bible contains a systematic code that, when unscrambled, has predicted world events of the past, present, and future. The authors of that book claimed to use a version of biblical text that is “the original version of the Old Testament, the Bible as it was first written,” and that there is “a universally accepted original Hebrew text.” No such text exists. The Old Testament or Hebrew Bible exists in a variety of forms, all reflecting different translations over the past few centuries.

Questionable Bible codes aside, these various translations over the centuries have shaped perceptions of the Bible and what peo
people believe it says. It still comes as a surprise to some English speakers that the Bible was not written in English—or to German speakers that it was not written in German. But research into ancient manuscripts, such as the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the discovery of other ancient libraries have provided many more clues about the people who did write the Bible.

First, researchers have learned that some of what appears in the most ancient sections of the Bible, including some of the stories in Genesis, was probably “borrowed” from other more ancient civilizations, particularly those of Egypt and Babylon. Various aspects of the Laws that God gives to Moses in Exodus are similar to Babylonian laws known as the Code of Hammurabi, which is a few centuries older than the Bible. The story of the infant Moses set afloat in a basket is similar to the Mesopotamian legend of an ancient king named Sargon. Some of the wisdom found in the biblical Proverbs sounds remarkably like the sayings of an Egyptian sage named Amen-em-ope who lived around the time of Solomon, the ostensible author of Proverbs. In other words, the authors of the Bible, like writers before and since, were not above liberal borrowing, or what modern writers call “fair use.”

The beginning of the actual process of writing down what Jews call the Tanakh and what Christians call the Old Testament dates back more than three thousand years to approximately 1000 BCE. The actual process of writing down the Scriptures followed an oral tradition that goes back at least another thousand years.

The oldest of the Hebrew scriptures are the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. In Jewish tradition, these five are called the “Torah” (“Law” or “Teaching”). They are also known as both the “Five Books of Moses” and, in Greek, the “Pentateuch” (“five scrolls”). For a very, very long time, it was assumed that Moses himself had written the five books of the Torah. While many devout Jews and Christians still hold to that belief, a majority of scholars and theologians accept that the Five Books of Moses were transmitted orally for centuries before being set down on scrolls beginning
some time after 1000 BCE—approximately the time that King David and Solomon are traditionally thought to have ruled Israel. This writing process was not completed until about 400 BCE.

Didn’t Moses write the Torah?

For centuries Moses was accepted as the author of the five books of Torah that are traditionally called the Books of Moses. The Torah stated that Moses wrote down what he was told, so this was not simply a scholar’s opinion but an unquestioned matter of faith for both Jews and Christians. Some editions of the Bible still assert that Moses was the author of Genesis, and there are earnest believers who hold that as an article of faith.

In the past, daring to question that “fact” took guts—and more than a little “chutzpah.” When an eleventh-century scholar pointed out that a list of kings mentioned in the Torah lived long after Moses died, he was called “Isaac the Blunderer” and his books were burned. Better his books burned than himself, Isaac undoubtedly mused. Four hundred years later, in the fifteenth century, new critics were raising awkward questions. Like: How could Moses write about his own death? Wasn’t it odd that he called himself the “humblest man on earth”? A truly humble man wouldn’t say such a thing. Besides recording his own death, Moses couldn’t know of other later events that are mentioned in the Torah, like the long list of kings from nearby Edom who lived after Moses died. Traditional scholars tried to argue that Moses was a prophet, so he knew who those future kings would be. Others said that Joshua, Moses’ successor, had merely tacked on a few lines after Moses died or that a later prophet updated the writings of Moses. But their arguments didn’t stop the questions.

By the seventeenth century, as Europe entered the era of the Enlightenment, when rational thought and scientific observations were elevated over blind faith, other scholars began to question the authorship of Moses. A French priest who raised questions
about Moses was arrested and forced to recant his views. In the grand tradition of the Roman Catholic church, his writing was banned and burned. The English translator of a book that claimed that the Torah was not the work of Moses also had to recant—which he did in 1688, “shortly before his release from the Tower,” as Richard Elliott Friedman wryly notes in *Who Wrote the Bible?*, a comprehensive study of Torah authorship. The official church resisted these questions about Moses for the same reason it always does: to ask questions raises doubts. But their power rested on unquestioning belief. Let some troublemakers start asking about Moses, and before you know it they’ll be asking why women can’t be priests!

What these generations of scholars all noted was that the Books of Moses, in which the Laws of God had been laid out, contained contradictions in time, place, and numbers of things, and names that couldn’t possibly belong in the time of Moses. Why were there duplicate versions of so many Bible stories, versions that did not always agree? Why, for instance, does Genesis open with two different versions of the Creation? Even more troubling, there were different names for God. If God had dictated these scriptures to Moses, why hadn’t God used the same name all the time? Why did Moses—who had spoken to God—use so many different names for God? And finally, how could Moses write, at the end of Deuteronomy: “Then Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord’s command”? (Deut. 34:5)

These and other troubling questions raised by the mystery of Moses just wouldn’t go away. And as the Enlightenment and Protestant Reformation chipped away at the pervasive power of the Church of Rome, the questions were asked by more and more people. No longer could church leaders explain away the numerous differences in style or the contradictions and anachronisms contained in the Torah as the “Word of God,” take it or leave it. As generations of scholars pursued this mystery, it became clearer that Moses was *not* the book’s author. They might be the Books
of Moses, but they were not the Books by Moses. Equally important was the mounting evidence that the books attributed to Moses were composed at very different historical times. To many serious scholars, it seemed apparent that more than one author was at work. On many of these points, honest people still disagree. The difference is no one is being burned for heresy any longer.

**If not Moses, then who?**

Imagine taking apart an intricately woven tapestry and trying to figure out where each strand of thread came from, who had woven the cloth, and what they were thinking when they wove it. This is the seemingly impossible task that lay in front of biblical scholars trying to establish authorship of the Bible. As these scholars unraveled the threads of the Hebrew scriptures, they could see that very different strands had been woven together to tell the story. Often, these strands made references to events that happened much later than the events being described. Like the clock in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, there were obvious anachronisms. Empires that didn’t exist when Moses was alive were mentioned. A king of the Philistines was said to be around hundreds of years before the Philistines moved into the neighborhood. Camels were described in use before they were actually domesticated. In other words, it seemed obvious that some writers composed this material long after the events they described and added “details” that would be meaningful to the people they were addressing.

There are still many literalists who faithfully assert that the Bible is the “Word of God,” dictated verbatim to “divinely chosen” individuals. However, most scholars now agree that there were at least four or five main authors, or groups of authors, of the Hebrew scriptures. They believe that they were composed over a long time, stretching from sometime around 1000 to 400 BCE. The idea that the Torah evolved from a combination of various sources
is formally known as the “Documentary Hypothesis.” This thinking gained such weight that, by 1943, even the Vatican under Pope Pius XII acknowledged it was time to solve these questions.

Today, the idea is widely accepted and taught by leading religious schools, including the divinity schools at Harvard and Yale, the Union Theological Seminary, and both the Jewish Theological Seminary and the Hebrew Union College. The precise identity of who wrote these books is an unsolved—and most likely an unsolvable—mystery, barring an archaeological find of the most revolutionary sort. But the principal “authors” have been given “names” and are identified by five letters of the alphabet: J, E, D, P, and R.

• J The oldest—and perhaps most celebrated—of these presumed authors is known as “J” from the German word Jahwe, the source of the word “Jehovah,” another mistranslation now written in English as “Yahweh.” The biblical writer code-named J consistently calls the Israelite God “Yahweh.”

In a controversial but bestselling book of biblical scholarship, The Book of J, author Harold Bloom argued that the Bible’s J was actually a woman. Many other scholars dismiss Bloom’s theory, and it remains a question that may never be resolved. Male or female, J probably lived sometime between 950 and 750 BCE, in Judah (another reason “he” is called J), the southern half of a divided Hebrew kingdom. J is the Hebrew Bible’s best storyteller, more interesting, more humorous, and more human than the others. J’s Yahweh interacts with man easily and directly. J told the more famous and most folkloric version of the two Creation accounts, which begins in Genesis 2. It is J’s Yahweh, for instance, who is walking in the Garden of Eden in the “cool of the day” (Gen. 3:8), a lovely poetic image, and discovers Adam and Eve hiding themselves, ashamed of their nakedness. J is also responsible for the “Song of Deborah,” an epic poem in the book of Judges about a Jewish “woman warrior.”

• E Close on J’s heels is E, the Elohist, so called because this author preferred to use the word Elohim for God. Although
some scholars have placed E before or even contemporary with J, most think E came later, perhaps between 850 and 800 BCE. Most also agree that E is a much less colorful writer than J, and that E’s contribution begins with the story of Abraham in Genesis 12. In the book of Judges, E tells a version of the Israelite heroine Deborah’s story in prose (J’s was a poetic version), and some of the details of the two accounts differ slightly.

- **D** The third Old Testament “author” is known as the “Deuteronomist,” who most likely worked between 700 and 600 BCE and was responsible for large portions of the book of Deuteronomy. D is also thought to have shaped the later books of Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel, and Kings—the major “historical” works of Hebrew scripture that describe the Conquest of Canaan and the establishment of the kingdom of Israel. In Deuteronomy, D depicts Moses giving a series of speeches that urge Israel to follow the Torah, but the law Moses offers in this section represents a revision of the earlier law books. Richard Elliot Friedman makes a case that D is the prophet Jeremiah, who lived in Jerusalem around 627 BCE and died in Egypt sometime after 587 BCE.

- **P** The texts credited to P, known as the Priestly author, include some of the most familiar words in western civilization—“In the beginning,” the Creation account found in Genesis 1, and the first version of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17).

P’s contribution was probably written sometime between 550 and 500 BCE. Highly concerned with the elaborate observances and duties of the ancient Jewish priesthood, P is responsible for nearly all of Leviticus. Dry and detail-obsessed, P was especially interested in codifying and justifying all of the ritual laws developed by the early Jewish priesthood, including the carefully worded descriptions of the Passover ritual, ordination ceremonies, the vestments of the high priest, and the sacred chest that held the Ten Commandments. P might as well have have been called “L,” because he is so concerned with the Law, but he is also often as long-winded and tedious as a lawyer.

- **R** In addition to these four “writers,” or groups of writ
ers, there was probably another individual or group responsible for creating the Pentateuch and some of the other early books of Israelite history as they now stand. In some respects, this was the most extraordinary feat. R was the Redactor, or editor, who took the four existing strands, and spliced them together, probably around 400 BCE. Like the others, R’s identity is a mystery. No one even knows whether there was more than one Redactor. The work of the Redactor is fascinating because of the way so many different and even contradictory strands of scripture were woven together. But is also raises a beguiling question. Were there any parts that R edited out of the picture? That is a mystery that remains in the realm of speculation.

This a vastly simplified overview of a question that scholars have puzzled over for more than a hundred years. Of course not everyone agrees with this multiple-author theory. Many “true believers” reject it entirely. And some who accept the theory dispute those who say that the “Documentary Hypothesis” suggests that the Bible is just a collection of fables stitched together to suit each man who did the stitching. Historian Paul Johnson strikes this note in A History of the Jews:

The Pentateuch is not therefore, a homogeneous work. But neither is it, as some scholars in the German critical tradition have argued, a deliberate falsification by priests, seeking to foist their self-interested religious beliefs on the people by attributing them to Moses and his age.... All the internal evidence shows that those who set down and conflated these writing, and the scribes who copied them...believed absolutely in the divine inspiration of the ancient texts and transcribed them with veneration and the highest possible standards of accuracy. (p.89)

In other words, though, by about 400 BCE, the Pentateuch or Torah had arrived in something like the form we know it today. Some of these writers, compilers, or editors, particularly the three
later writers—D, P, and R—were also involved in composing other parts of the Hebrew scriptures. As for the other thirty-four books of the Hebrew Bible—the Prophets and the Writings—evidence of authorship is either shaky or a complete mystery. Many of the books show the handiwork of writers working at different times and in different historical circumstances. But it is safe to say that David didn’t write all, or even most, of the Psalms of David. Solomon didn’t write Proverbs or the Song of Solomon, and Isaiah didn’t write Isaiah. These “books,” again transmitted orally for generations, were not finally set down in something like their present form until about 400 BCE, long after Moses and David. Some were not considered “Holy Scripture” for many more years. It was only around 90 CE that the Jewish rabbis closed the book on what they considered the “official” list of their Bible.

Who were the Children of Israel?

Why is there no evidence outside the Bible that such crucial personalities as Abraham or Moses existed? Why didn’t the Israelites think to make sure that they kept track of which precise mountain was Mount Sinai of the Ten Commandments? Why does the Bible fail to mention the pyramids of Egypt, surely the most extraordinary structures then in existence?

These are bothersome questions for any thinking reader of the Bible. But they point to another underlying issue: most of us have no sense of the historical background of the Israelites and little idea as to who the people of the Hebrew Bible actually were. This brings us to a basic fact: it is nearly impossible to understand the writing and meaning of the Bible without understanding the history of the people who wrote it, the ancient Israelites. Of course, there are plenty of Hollywood images, which are practically useless. Most likely Samson didn’t look like Victor Mature.

Who were these people, the first Jews? We use the words “Hebrew,” “Jew,” and “Israelite” almost interchangeably, but even
these words came into use much later in history. So what was Israel like in the fifteen hundred years between the Patriarchs and the Prophets, roughly from 2000 to 500 BCE?

Located on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean, the world of the Bible is a tiny area—but it was a natural bridge between three continents, Africa, Asia, and Europe, as well as a natural beachhead for seafaring traders from the Mediterranean. And it was this geography that made the area such a collecting point for so many different groups who have had so much impact on history.

Though small in area, this land the Bible called Canaan features an extraordinary diversity of climate and features. A gentle coastline slopes up to mountains and the vast deserts beyond. The Jordan River flows from the steep, snow-topped mountains of Jordan, into a beautiful freshwater lake, the Sea of Galilee or Lake Tiberias, before plunging down to the lowest point on the surface of the earth, the Dead (or Salt) Sea. A lake thick with mineral salts, the Dead Sea is surrounded by an extremely hot, rocky wilderness. Into this land of such striking contrasts came waves of people, some as wanderers, some as traders, but many as invaders and conquerors. This was a blood-soaked piece of real estate, just as it continues to be today.

But long, long before the peoples of the Bible, long before the civilizations of Egypt or Mesopotamia, there were people here. They included some of the earliest known human settlers, a Stone Age people called Natufian. They were named for the Wadi en-Natuf, in the Judean hills, where a cave was discovered with evidence of some of the earliest known human settlements. The Natufians, dating to around 10,000 to 8000 BCE, were among the first people to live in permanent villages. Primarily hunter-gatherers, they also left evidence of grinding flour, and digs near the Sea of Galilee have yielded bone fishhooks and harpoons. These people practiced burial, and studies of their graves show that the dead were buried with jewelry and animals carved from stone and bone, evidence that from a very early time humans were interested, if not obsessed, with the “after-life.”
Over hundreds of centuries, a wide variety of people eventually settled these lands, evolving from primitive hunter-gatherers to nomadic herders, then settled farmers and finally city dwellers. One of the oldest of human settlements is Jericho, famed in the Bible as the city destroyed by trumpets. First excavated in the 1950s by British archaeologist Kathleen Kenyon, Jericho is nearly ten thousand years old, and has been almost continuously inhabited. By about 3000 BCE, about the time the first pyramid was built, Jericho had a strong defensive system, evidence of a high degree of social organization.

The names of the various groups who settled this land include the Canaanites, Edomites, Moabites, Amorites, Jebusites, and Hittites—all now lost tribes. Later arrivals included the Philistines, who apparently migrated from the Mediterranean islands of Crete or Cyprus and settled on the coastline sometime after 1200 BCE. To the north on the Mediterranean coast, in what is modern Lebanon, were the Phoenicians, the extraordinary sailors and dyers of cloth who also get credit for devising an alphabet that influenced our own.

Bracketing the land of Canaan were the two great superpowers of the ancient world. To the north and east was the land of Mesopotamia (from Greek for “between two rivers”), the “Cradle of Civilization” that sprang up in the fertile plains between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and produced the Akkadians, Sumerians, Assyrians, and other “Babylonians.” At the extreme other end of the land was Egypt, home of a civilization that lasted for thousands of years. Wedged into a tiny strip of land between sea and desert, Canaan served as bridge, buffer, and battleground between these two great ancient lands whose emperors vied for control of the area for centuries.

The land called Canaan in the Bible gradually grew to include both rural and urban people. A true melting pot, it was a land of herders, farmers, and traders. It was also a land of many gods and religions, although one group of Canaanite gods was most widely worshiped. The supreme god, the creator, was called El, a word
that figures prominently in Genesis, as evidenced in such names as Israel and Bethel. El’s son was the storm god Baal, another name that appears prominently throughout ancient Israel’s violent history. And among Baal’s consorts were Astarte and Asherah, mythical female goddesses who must have been very alluring to the Children of Israel. The followers of Moses and their descendants kept getting into trouble with their Yahweh God because they continued to worship these fertility goddesses instead of Yahweh. Since worshiping Baal and his goddesses probably meant having sex, or watching priests have sex, it was presumably more appealing to the masses than a religion that involved killing small animals and didn’t allow women in the temple.

This “oversexed” Canaan was the little piece of land that the Israelites said they had been promised by their God. There is little historical or archaeological evidence to tell much about the people who came to be called “Hebrews”—a word possibly derived from an Egyptian word, habiru, a derogatory term for “outsiders”—or “Jews,” derived from the later Roman name for the country, Judea. No one really knows when the “Children of Israel” arrived in Canaan. No one really knows precisely where they came from, although the evidence points to beginnings in the Tigris-Euphrates area. At some point, they moved into Canaan, and sometime after 2000 BCE some of them crossed into Egypt and remained there in the Nile Delta for a few hundred years. This group left Egypt, where they said they had been enslaved by an unnamed Pharaoh, and moved into the wastelands of either the Sinai or Arabian desert for forty years under the direction of a charismatic leader named Moses who said he spoke to God. Through Moses, the ancient promises that these people would one day possess Canaan were reconfirmed.

By around 1200 BCE, through conquest or gradual migration—the Bible has it both ways—they eventually took control of the land from the Canaanites, whose religious and sexual practices were so abhorrent to them. It’s difficult to say precisely what these Canaanites did that was so abominable, but it can be assumed they
had sex in their temples, and possibly didn’t flinch at homosexuality, incest, bestiality, or human sacrifice.

The first piece of historical evidence of the existence of the Children of Israel is a stone plaque, or stela, from Egypt dated c. 1235 BCE. This stela from the reign of Pharaoh Merneptah mentions the complete destruction of the people of Israel. Merneptah’s claim of a lopsided military victory, obviously inflated, is the first recorded reference to the people of Israel outside the Bible. Once the Israelites got their toehold in the interior hill country, they came to blows with another powerful group of recent arrivals, the Philistines, who had come from the Mediterranean and settled in cities along the coastline around 1200 BCE.

By around 1000 BCE, under the leadership of a dashing soldier-poet named David, who finally did in the Philistines, and his brilliant son Solomon, the Israelites finally controlled the land that they had been promised. But their empire was short-lived. After Solomon’s death in 922 BCE, the kingdom was split in two in a civil war that left both halves of the divided nation vulnerable. The northern part was called Israel and the southern part Judah. The two nations vied for control over the land as well as authority in religious matters, each professing to be the true heirs of Abraham, Moses, and the promises from God.

The good times didn’t last long. In 722 BCE, the Assyrians under Sargon II conquered Israel—the northern kingdom—and deported thirty thousand upper-class Israelites to the Euphrates River area in one of history’s first recorded episodes of “ethnic cleansing.” These ten northern tribes were dispersed throughout modern-day Iraq and Syria and became the so-called “Lost Tribes” of Israel. About one hundred years later, the southern kingdom, Judah, was conquered too, this time by the new superpower in the area, the Chaldeans (or Neo-Babylonians), led by Nebuchadnezzar. In 587 BCE, his troops captured and looted Jerusalem, destroyed the Great Temple built by Solomon, and set the city on fire. Thousands of the elite of Judean society were taken to Babylon in what is commonly known as the Exile. It is
possible that they carried with them the “Ark of the Covenant,” the sacred chest holding the stone tablets with the Ten Commandments, although this most holy object in Israel may have been destroyed with the temple. Somehow, in that fifty-year exile, the Ark of the Covenant disappeared without a trace or a mention. Of course, if you like Hollywood history, Steven Spielberg would have you think that the chest was found by Indiana Jones and is now locked up in some dusty U.S. government warehouse.

The final composition and editing of the Torah, along with the rest of the Tanakh, or Old Testament, largely took place over the stormy five hundred years between 900 and 400 BCE. And it was against that background of historical events—kings rising and falling, bitter disputes over religious authority, nations divided, conquests, and Exile—that the Hebrew scriptures were finally set down.

If they wrote it in Hebrew, where did all the Greek words come from?

Approximately two thousand years of history pass within the Bible’s pages. Great empires came and went around the ancient Near East: Sumer, Akkadia, Babylon, Egypt, Assyria, Persia, and Greece. Along with those rising and falling empires and cultures, Hebrew and Aramaic fell into disuse, eventually replaced by Greek. And sometime around 250 BCE, when many Jews realized that they no longer understood the Hebrew of their ancient religion, someone decided to preserve those writings in a complete Greek translation of Hebrew scripture. An old tradition held that this Greek translation of the Hebrew holy scrolls was commissioned by Ptolemy II (282-246 BCE), one of the heirs to Alexander the Great who ruled Egypt after Alexander’s death. Based on manuscripts sent from Jerusalem to the famed Library at Alexandria,
this Greek translation was later called the Septuagint, meaning “seventy.” According to the legend, seventy-two elders, six from each of the twelve tribes of Israel, did the translating. Each of these elders produced exactly the same translation in exactly seventy-two days. The number was rounded off to seventy. Of course, this sounds like the old notion that enough monkeys working at typewriters with enough time could produce the works of Shakespeare.

Modern scholars dismiss the connection with Ptolemy, as well as the seventy-two identical translations, as legend. In fact, the work was begun because the large Jewish community in Egypt and elsewhere in the Hellenized—or Greek-speaking—world needed a translation from Hebrew, which had fallen out of use during the Diaspora, or “dispersion” of Jews throughout the Mediterranean world.

The Greek Septuagint became the most popular form of the Hebrew Bible. It was the unofficial Scripture of the early Christians who read the Hebrew Laws and prophets in Greek. Roman Catholic Bibles, such as the Jerusalem Bible, still show this influence. Some of the books in the Septuagint were not considered “holy” by the Jewish rabbis who established the official “canon” of their Bible. When the Christian church split during the Protestant Reformation, the Protestants accepted the Jewish canon. That’s why the Protestant Old Testament is the same as the Hebrew Bible, except for the order and numbering of some books. However, Roman Catholics considered the Septuagint holy, and Roman Catholic Bibles include eleven books that are not in the Hebrew or Protestant Old Testament. These books, called the deuterocanonical books, are represented in modern Bibles in the Apocrypha. (Apocrypha, not to be confused with Apocalypse, is from Greek by way of Latin and means “hidden.”) To further confuse this issue, other Christian sects, such as the Eastern Orthodox churches, recognize even more books as sacred. In other words, for nearly two thousand years, humans have been deciding
what should and shouldn’t be read as the divine word of God. All of them claim to be inspired by God in making those judgments, but all don’t agree.

The next major step in the process that led to the Bible as it is known today came when Latin, the language of the Roman empire, replaced Greek as the Western world’s common language. By the time Christianity moved from outlaw religion to accepted faith after Emperor Constantine began to tolerate Christians in 313 CE, Greek was a dying language. Although Latin translations of parts of the Scriptures began to appear, there was no formal, official Latin version of the Bible. Beginning in 382 CE, a priest named Jerome began the process of bringing both Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament into Latin.

Working for twenty years in Bethlehem, the traditional birthplace of Jesus, Jerome went back to the original Hebrew and Aramaic texts, instead of simply translating the Septuagint Greek into Latin. Jerome supervised the translation of a Latin Bible that was completed by 405 CE. His work resulted in the *versio vulgata*, or “common translation,” better known as the Vulgate Bible. To Jerome, *vulgata* meant “vulgar” in the sense of “commonly used,” rather than the widespread modern meaning of vulgar as “dirty.” But this is a perfect example of how words change meaning, a significant factor in understanding the Bible. Many words simply do not mean in the modern world what they meant in the Jerome’s Latin fifteen hundred years ago, or King James’s English of the 1600s. Among Jerome’s decisions was to retain the use of the name “Jesus,” which was how the first-century Greek writers of the New Testament had translated the Hebrew name Joshua.

At about the same time that Christians were transforming Greek into the Latin Vulgate, another crucial set of old Jewish scriptures was being maintained in its “official” Hebrew form by the Masoretes, a school of medieval Jewish scholars who worked between 500 CE and 1000 CE. They produced the original “Masoretic” text. The Masoretes made a crucial addition to the ancient Hebrew consonants-only writings—they included vowel signs, ac
cent markings, and marginal notes, a kind of “Cliffs Notes” for the Hebrew Bible. These marginal notes provide a much clearer understanding of the ancient Hebrew texts, and the Masoretic texts have since become the standard used in studying ancient Hebrew scriptures. Yet even the oldest complete Masoretic texts—the Leningrad Codex and the Aleppo Codex—date only to about the year 1000 CE, practically a blink of the eye in the scheme of the Bible’s composition. (“Codex,” by the way, is a word for the earliest collections of bound pages; in other words, the first books were actually an innovation of the early Christians.)

When the Roman Catholic church became the predominant force in western Europe during the medieval era, the Latin Vulgate remained the standard by which European Christians knew the Bible. Of course, only priests and a few wealthy educated individuals could read the “Word of God.” During this era, the Scriptures were still copied by hand in the famed illuminated manuscripts of the so-called “Dark Ages.” Of course, few people could afford to own such a book and few ever saw one. Fewer still could read it. The Latin Mass, formalized and made into an elaborate ritual under Pope Damasus I (366-384), became the predominant form of worship in Europe. But most people had no idea what was being said in church. The advent of Gutenberg’s printing press in 1450 meant the Bible could be mechanically produced, but even then, only about two hundred copies of the Gutenberg Bible were produced. And it was still in Latin.

But in the early years of the movement that came to be called the Protestant Reformation, begun in Germany in 1517 by Martin Luther, a few daring souls attempted to translate Holy Scripture from the Hebrew, Greek, and Latin into commonly used German and English. Like the mythical Prometheus, punished for bringing fire to mankind, some of these rebels would pay for their “crimes.” Some died for their belief that the Bible was for all the people to read.

In England, another renegade priest, William Tyndale, also wanted to make the Scriptures available to all people. But he had
to leave England to do so. Working in Germany, where Martin Luther had published his German New Testament in 1520, Tyndale also completed a New Testament first. Although some printers were prevented from publishing it, Tyndale’s English New Testament appeared in 1526. His Old Testament began to appear in pieces in 1530. Again, the authorities were not amused. Tyndale was lured out of hiding and finally captured, arrested, and tried for heresy. In 1536, Tyndale was strangled. Just to make sure the message was clear, his remains were then burned. Tyndale died because he believed “that the boy that dryveth the plough shall know more of the scripture.” It is a small measure of justice that Tyndale’s work became the basis for the 1611 King James Version, the most influential and lasting of English translations. Now at last, “In the beginning” could be understood by all.

That is a brief glimpse at the long and sometimes painful trail of the Bible as it is known in the twentieth century. And that is why you have such a hard time when you go out to buy a Bible.

**MILESTONES IN THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES**

This timeline shows a simplified overview of the probable dates of the composition and later translation of the Hebrew scriptures, or Old Testament. Many of these dates are speculative and unconfirmed by archaeological or other historical sources and there is disagreement over some of them. The most questionable dates are marked with a ?.

**Dates Before the Common Era (BCE)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year Range</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000-1700</td>
<td>Age of the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1700-1500</td>
<td>Joseph in Egypt?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1295-1230</td>
<td>The Exodus from Egypt?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1240-1190</td>
<td>Israelite Conquest of Canaan?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1020-1005</td>
<td>Reign of Saul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1005-967</td>
<td>Reign of David</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>967-931</td>
<td>Reign of Solomon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>922</td>
<td>Division of Solomon’s Kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>950-900</td>
<td>J (Jahwist) at work?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
850-800  E (Elohist) at work?
722  Conquest of the Northern Kingdom; deportation of the Ten Tribes to Assyria—the “Lost Tribes of Israel”
650-600  D (Deuteronomist) at work?
622  A “Book of the Law,” similar to Deuteronomy, discovered in the First Temple
587/6  Fall of Judah; destruction of the First Temple; Babylonian Exile begins
550-500  P (Priestly source) at work?
538  Return to Jerusalem from Exile
520-515  Construction of Second Temple
400  R (Redactor) at work?
250-100  Septuagint: Translation from Hebrew to Greek
100  Earliest surviving Hebrew texts (Dead Sea Scrolls)

Dates in the Common Era (CE)
70  Destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans
90  Final canonization of the Hebrew Bible
405  Vulgate: Latin translation by Saint Jerome
500-1000  Masorah: Standardized Hebrew texts
1520  Luther’s German New Testament
1526  Tyndale’s English Pentateuch
1560  Geneva Bible (Shakespeare’s Bible, also used by the Mayflower Pilgrims)
1611  King James Version

Map on next page: THE WORLD OF THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST
This map depicts many of the key locations referred to in discussing events in Hebrew scripture, the Old Testament. This map is meant to convey a general overview of the area, since the time period in question covers many thousands of years. Not all of the locations shown on this map existed at the same time. For example, while Babylon was a very ancient city, Alexandria in Egypt was not founded until the end of Old Testament times.