

# Where Did the Bible Come From?



Session 1



**Deuteronomy 6:20–25**

## Session Objective

Many of the basic questions youth (and, for that matter, Christians of all ages) ask about the origins of the Bible—How did we get our Bible? Who wrote the Bible?—can be answered concretely. Other questions in that vein—How do we know whether everything in the Bible really happened? Are all the stories in the Bible real?—have answers that are more nuanced. In this session, we’ll answer some of these questions and think critically about other questions, with the aim of arriving at a higher level of understanding and appreciation of the book we know as our Bible.

## Faith Statement

We believe and confess the canonical Scriptures of the holy prophets and apostles of both Testaments to be the true Word of God, and to have sufficient authority of themselves, not of humanity. For God spoke to the fathers and mothers, prophets, apostles, and still speaks to us through the Holy Scriptures.

— *The Second Helvetic Confession* (5.001)

## Session Overview

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Enhancements

Family Connections  
Documentary Films:  
Biblical Origins and  
Events

*The Bible Speaks to You*



For instructions to  
download Web  
Resources and the  
coffeehouse version,  
see page 1.

## Spiritual Reflection for Leaders

Take a few moments to read Deuteronomy 6:20–25. Think back to your earliest memories of learning about faith, God, the Bible, and the church.

- How were the basics of the faith presented to you?
- How did you experience God’s commands and God’s care in your childhood and youth?
- What are the important aspects of the life of faith that you try to impart to youth in your own teaching?

As you prepare to lead this session, pray for your group and pray that both you and the youth are open to the ways God is at work in all of your lives, leading you to respond in grateful obedience.



## Understanding the Scripture

The Bible has both much to say and nothing to say about its origins. Many of its authors speak of the inspiration that led them to write their particular books. Ezekiel, for example, is both specific and quite dramatic: “In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the river Chebar, the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God” (1:1). In the New Testament, the author of the Gospel of John injects himself into the very end of the book: “This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true” (21:24). Similarly Paul, whose books are actually letters, opens and closes each of them with personal greetings. (See, for example, Romans 1:1–7 and 16:1–27; Galatians 1:1–5 and 6:11–18; and Philemon 1–3 and 23–25.)

The individual biblical authors, however, had no inkling that their writings would eventually be compiled into the book we know as the Bible. Thus, when we ask, “How did we get our Bible?” or, “Who wrote the Bible?” we’re really asking about compiling and editing and about difficult processes of negotiation and discernment. And when we ask, “How do we know whether everything in the Bible really happened?” or, “Are all the stories in the Bible real?” we’re asking about history and archaeology, as well as about interpretation.

Clearly, no single passage of Scripture is concerned with all of these questions, but one that comes close is Deuteronomy 6:20–25, particularly in regard to that last question, “Are all the stories in the Bible real?” Deuteronomy is a book of instructions: As the Hebrew people stand on the threshold of the Promised Land, Moses aims to teach them God’s law, most notably in what we know as the Ten Commandments (5:6–21). But these instructions are more than just *what*; they also explain *why*, by telling the story of what God has done for

1. Patrick D. Miller, *Deuteronomy*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), p. 109.

the people: “ ‘We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt, but the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand.’ ” (6:21). God’s Word serves “to create a memory for the new generation,”<sup>1</sup> for the children of the Hebrew sojourners as well as for us.

In reminding us to ask not only *what* but *why*, this passage makes clear that the Bible is not only a book of history but also a book of theology. It tells stories of God’s interactions with God’s people with the aim of instructing the reader in how he or she ought to interact with God and with others. In this sense, the reality—the truth—of the stories in the Bible transcends the question of whether a particular event actually happened.



## Understanding the Faith Statement

The document that became known as *The Second Helvetic Confession* was written in 1561 by the Swiss pastor, theologian, and Reformer Heinrich Bullinger, who intended simply to attach it to his last will and testament as a personal statement of faith. Bullinger made the document public, however, in response to crisis and conflict in Germany between Lutherans and Reformers.<sup>2</sup>

Like other confessions dating from the Protestant Reformation, *The Second Helvetic Confession* begins with a statement that Scripture—specifically the Old and New Testaments—is the “true Word of God.” (Compare, for example, the Nicene Creed, which begins, “We believe in one God . . .” [1.1].) Placing Scripture ahead of God doesn’t mean that Scripture is more important than God; rather, this ordering illustrates the Reformed emphasis on the Bible, rather than on church tradition, as the ultimate authority. In stating that God “spoke to the fathers and mothers, prophets, apostles, and still speaks to us through the Holy Scriptures,” *The Second Helvetic Confession* bridges the centuries between the writing of the Bible and the present day, affirming that the Bible is not just a historical relic but a living Word, infused with the Spirit.

2. *The Book of Confessions* (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.], 2007), p. 52.



## Teaching Today's Question

With its arcane language, its innumerable descriptions of fantastic and miraculous events, its abstruse rules and regulations, and its many contradictions, the Bible can seem impenetrable and overwhelming. As a result, some young people pick and choose what they appreciate from the Bible (and will apply to their lives), while others disregard it altogether.

Part of the problem is that we have received the Bible as a single, great, big book, as if it were a novel or a history text. When we open it and begin to read and discover that it doesn't "flow," we become discouraged and disillusioned. This session, then, addresses the question of the Bible's origins by taking the Bible apart—examining authorship, dates of composition, and so on—in order to then put it back together, examining the formation of the canon and some basic questions of interpretation.

The learning activities in this session deal with different aspects of where the Bible came from—they don't all answer the same question! In your preparation, be sure to note which activities address which questions, and plan your lesson with the interests and needs of your students in mind.



## Enter

### Graffiti Sheets: The Bible

- Copy of "Graffiti Sheets" (Web Resource 1a) or newsprint, markers

Post the following questions around the meeting space. Either print out the questions using "Graffiti Sheets" (Web Resource 1a) or write each question on a separate sheet of newsprint.

- What is your favorite book of the Bible?
- What is your favorite Bible story?
- What is your favorite Bible verse?
- If you have your own Bible, where and when did you get it?
- If you have your own Bible, what kind (translation, version) do you have?
- How often do you read the Bible on your own?

Welcome the young people as they arrive and give each person a marker. Invite the participants to circulate around the meeting space, reading the posted questions and adding their responses to the graffiti sheets.



## Engage

### Option A: Resting with the Question

- Candle or oil lamp, matches, music player, recording of contemplative music

Gather the group in a comfortable space. Consider setting the mood by dimming the lights, lighting a candle or oil lamp, and listening to contemplative music. Explore the following questions with the young people.



- Where did the Bible come from?
- How did we get our Bible?
- Who wrote the Bible?
- How do we know whether everything in the Bible really happened?
- Are all the stories in the Bible real?

### Opening Prayer

*God of wisdom and light, we can hold your Word in our hand, but it's still a mystery. So much of the Bible seems so foreign and strange. As we explore together the origins of the Bible, open our minds to the lives and insights of your servants who put your Word on paper, and in so doing illuminate that Word for us in a new way. Through Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.*

Pray the opening prayer.

## Option B: Charting a Course

Copy of “Engage Questions” (Web Resource 1b) or newsprint and markers

Post the following questions in the teaching space. Either arrange the questions printed from “Engage Questions” (Web Resource 1b) on a wall or bulletin board, or write the following questions on a single sheet of newsprint:

- Where did the Bible come from?
- How did we get our Bible?
- Who wrote the Bible?
- How do we know whether everything in the Bible really happened?
- Are all the stories in the Bible real?

Explain to the participants that this session is about the origins of the Bible, then call their attention to the posted questions. Briefly explore the questions together, encouraging the participants to add similar questions about the origin of the Bible to the list. As a group, rank the list of questions from the most important to the least important. Then rank the list from the easiest to answer to the hardest to answer. Pray the opening prayer.



## Explore

### Option A: Study of Deuteronomy 6:20–25

Bibles, dictionary, Bible dictionary, *The Prince of Egypt* (1998, PG) and movie-viewing equipment (optional)

If possible, view the following clip from *The Prince of Egypt*: 1:22:19–1:31:23. The clip shows a fictionalized interpretation of the Israelites’ crossing of the Red Sea and the gift of the Ten Commandments. (This is simply to set the mood for the Bible study, since the Scripture text refers directly to God’s rescue of the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt.)

Make sure each participant has a Bible, and ask each person to read Deuteronomy 6:20–25 silently. Then ask a participant to read the passage aloud. Using a dictionary and/or Bible dictionary, help the participants look up the definitions to any terms they are unsure of. Point out that verse 20 asks the question that the remaining verses answer, then discuss some or all of the following:

- According to the passage, why are the people meant to obey God’s law? Lead the group in examining Deuteronomy 5:6–7, 12–15, which gives the same reason for two of the Ten Commandments.
- What is the role of *remembering* in obedience to God’s law? What are the people to remember?



- As Christians, we can remember things that occurred for centuries following the time of the Exodus from Egypt. What are some of the important events and acts of God that we can add to God's deliverance of God's people from slavery in Egypt?
- What is the role of the Bible in helping us remember? What is the role of biblical "memory" in helping us live lives of faith?
- As we've discussed, this passage gives a concrete reason for obeying God's law: Because God delivered our ancestors from slavery, we are called to obey God. But the Bible is more than law. Looking at the Bible as a whole, what, in your view, is the proper role of the Bible in informing your daily life?
- What is the appropriate motivation for you to live a Christian life? Is it because of what God has done for you, or is there another reason?

### Option B: Taking the Bible Apart



Study Bibles with background information on each book, such as *The Discipleship Study Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), *The HarperCollins Study Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), or *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); long sheet of newsprint (as from a roll); markers; Bible dictionary

Prepare the roll of newsprint by marking out a three-thousand-year timeline, beginning at 1500 B.C. and ending at A.D. 1500. If a church library containing the resources listed above is available, consider holding this portion of the session in the library. Divide the participants into groups of two or three, and assign each group a portion of the Bible. For example, with four small groups, two groups would work on the Old Testament and two groups would work on the New Testament. Invite the youth to use the available resources to fill in the timeline with dates of composition of and information about authorship for the books of the Bible. If time is limited, encourage the groups to complete as many books as possible. Once the timeline is complete, ask the participants to share insights, surprises, and questions.

### Option C: The Dead Sea Scrolls



*The Secrets of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (2003, not rated) and movie-viewing equipment

View the following clip with the group: 0:00–5:08. Then discuss some or all of the following questions:



- What are the Dead Sea Scrolls?
- When and by whom were the scrolls written?
- What is so important about the Dead Sea Scrolls?
- How does the existence of the Dead Sea Scrolls affect your view of the origins, composition, and integrity of the Bible?



## Express

### Option A: Art with Hebrew and Greek

- Bibles, “Hebrew and Greek” (Web Resource 1c), broad-stroke permanent markers, watercolor paper, Bible concordance, fine-point permanent markers, sponge brushes, containers of water, watercolor paints

Give each participant a copy of “Hebrew and Greek” (Web Resource 1c) and ask each person to choose a word from one of the lists. Have each participant use a broad-stroke permanent marker to copy the selected Hebrew or Greek word, in large letters, at the top or in the middle of the watercolor paper. Next, each person should use the concordance to look up a verse or part of a verse from the Bible that uses the selected word. Have the students use fine-point permanent markers to add their verses in English underneath the Hebrew or Greek words. Finally, the participants should use sponge brushes to lightly wet their paper then to add watercolor paint to the wet paper, creating a soft, pastel watercolor look to serve as background for the verse. Allow the pieces to dry.

### Option B: “Deep in the Shadows of the Past”

- “*Lectio Divina* Guidelines” (Web Resource 1d), candle or oil lamp, matches, copies of *The Presbyterian Hymnal* for each student, piano or other musical accompaniment (optional)

Gather the group into a circle. Light the candle or oil lamp and place it in the middle of the circle. Sing or read hymn no. 330 in *The Presbyterian Hymnal*, “Deep in the Shadows of the Past.” Then use the information found on “*Lectio Divina* Guidelines” (Web Resource 1d) to lead the group in a *lectio divina* of “Deep in the Shadows of the Past.” Invite the group members to reflect on what they’ve learned about the origins of the Bible in light of this hymn, particularly the role of the Holy Spirit in the formation of the Bible.



## Exit

### God’s Word: The Big Picture

- “Exit Questions” (Web Resource 1e) or newsprint, copy of *The Presbyterian Hymnal* for each student, piano or other musical accompaniment (optional)

Post the following questions around the meeting space. Either print out the questions using “Exit Questions” (Web Resource 1e) or write each question on a separate sheet of newsprint.

- Why does it matter that God’s Word was written?
- Why does it matter that God’s Word was published?
- Why does it matter that God’s Word was incarnated? (And who is the incarnation of God’s Word?)
- How else does God’s Word come to us?

Review the activities and learnings from this session, then explore the following questions together:



- What new insights or surprises did you gain from this session?
- What unanswered questions remain?
- Will you approach the Bible differently as a result of what you've learned in this session? Why or why not?

Give each participant a copy of *The Presbyterian Hymnal* and invite each person to turn to hymn no. 331, "Thanks to God Whose Word Was Written." After giving the group a moment to read the hymn or sing the hymn together, discuss the posted questions. (Note that each question corresponds to a verse of the hymn.)

Pray the closing prayer together.

### **Closing Prayer**

*God of the Way and the Word, we thank you for the miracle that we know as the Bible. As we continue to seek to grow in both faith and knowledge, send your Spirit upon this group and upon this whole community of faith, that we might learn from one another as we read and study and worship, gathered around your holy Word. Amen.*



## **Enhancements**

Other Ways to Connect with the Session

### **Family Connections**

"Family Connections" (Web Resource) has a set of discussion questions for each of the four sessions in this course that families can talk about after class. Provide each family with a copy of this resource.

### **Documentary Films: Biblical Origins and Events**

There's a lot of interest in the historicity of biblical events, and many documentary films explore these events. Some possibilities:

- *The Bible's Buried Secrets* (2008, not rated): This NOVA documentary examines the origins of the Hebrew Bible; related information is available online at [pbs.org/wgbh/nova/bible](http://pbs.org/wgbh/nova/bible).
- *The Exodus Decoded* (2006, not rated): This documentary from the History Channel delves into history, archaeology, and geology, seeking evidence to shed new light on the events of the Exodus, including the parting of the Red Sea.
- *The Exodus Revealed: Search for the Red Sea Crossing* (2001, not rated): This film traces the possible route of the Israelites during the Exodus and provides what it claims to be physical evidence, including the remains of settlements in Egypt's Nile Delta, Egyptian records of the Israelites' bondage under Pharaoh, and the location of Mount Sinai.

- *The Fabric of Time* (2007, not rated): This film presents a three-dimensional holographic image suggested to reveal the face of Jesus Christ and discusses the authenticity of the Shroud of Turin.
- *Jesus and the Shroud of Turin* (2003, not rated): This film explores the arguments for and against authenticating the shroud as the actual burial cloth of Jesus.

This is by no means a complete list of the available films and topics. Web sites such as Amazon.com provide links to related materials for all of the above films.

### ***The Bible Speaks to You***

Consider using Robert McAfee Brown's *The Bible Speaks to You* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985) for an extended study of the origins, compilation, and message of the Bible. Though originally published in 1955, *The Bible Speaks to You* remains a pertinent, straightforward, and approachable look at the Bible. You might use selections of the book to supplement each of the sessions in this unit; the first two chapters address many of the questions raised in this session. Or you might read and study the entire book over an extended period.



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