

How to Study the Bible

Lesson 1: How We Got the Bible

I. Introduction:

The topic of origins has fascinated men and women for centuries. People from all stripes perform copious amounts of research to trace their ancestral heritage. Scientists opine about the origin of natural phenomena. Children ask their parents the dreaded question “Where did I come from?” A number of reasons warrant such curiosity. One that comes to mind is that we believe that the past holds the keys to the future. Understanding our family heritage may give us insight into why we look and act the way we do. Inquiry into the origin of a tornado may warn us of future ones to come. Knowing how children are made, can give us greater insight into the human body and advance modern medicine. In light of this, wisdom dictates that before we understand how to study the Bible, we endeavor to comprehend its origin.

- Why is it important to understand the origin of the Bible? How does knowing how it was put together give us insight into how to interpret it?

II. Inspiration:

The Bible is not just another book. It’s God’s book – revealing the heart and mind of the Creator. The following study on inspiration will give us insight into this glorious truth.

- Definition:** God superintended the human authors of the Bible so that they composed and recorded without error His message to mankind in the words of their original writings.¹
- A few other terms help us to define the scope of the inspiration of God’s Word. It is *plenary* (not in part but the whole) and *verbal* (inspiration extends to the words as well as the ideas). Thus, when we speak of the verbal plenary inspiration of the Scriptures we stress that the totality of the Bible is the inerrant, infallible, and very Word of God.
- 2 Timothy 3:16-17** *All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.*

Note on “inspired”: Literally “God-breathed,” this word offers the sense of words coming directly from the mouth of God. Nearly 4,000 times in the Old Testament you will find words like “the Lord spoke,” “the Lord commanded,” “Thus saith the Lord,” “The Lord said,” etc.

¹ Charles Ryrie Systematic Theology p. 71.

D. 2 Peter 1:20-21 But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

1. Consider the usage of “move” in *Acts 27:15* (especially in light of the interaction between the wind and the sailors). What does this suggest about the Holy Spirit’s role in writing Scripture?

Acts 27:15 and when the ship was caught in it and could not face the wind, we gave way to it and let ourselves be driven along.

2. What are some distinctly “human” characteristics of the Bible? How does this explain why different books have different styles?
3. Ultimately, who is responsible for the authorship of Scripture?

III. How Was the Bible Written?

While the Bible has one divine author, nearly forty human authors cooperated with the Holy Spirit. Beginning with Moses who penned the first two chapters in Genesis around BC1405 the Bible spans nearly 1500 years concluding with Revelation recorded by the Apostle John in AD95. These authors resided everywhere from Rome to Babylon, thus the events, topography, culture, and even language bleeds through the human authors. The three languages of the Bible testify to its diverse cultural background. Hebrew makes up the bulk of the Old Testament, Greek the New, and Aramaic in Daniel and select sayings in the Gospels.

IV. How do we know that we have the entire Bible?

Another way of phrasing the question is “What books comprise the Canon of Scripture.” The Canon of Scripture is the collection of books that met certain tests and thus were considered inspired by God, authoritative, and govern our lives.²

During the life of Christ the Old Testament was divided up into lists of twenty two books or twenty four books respectively. In the twenty-two book canon Ruth was part of Judges and Lamentations was part of Jeremiah. The books were divided as follows:

² Charles Ryrie, p. 534.

A. LAW

1. Genesis
2. Exodus
3. Leviticus
4. Numbers
5. Deuteronomy

B. PROPHETS

(Former Prophets)

6. Joshua
7. Judges
8. Samuel
9. Kings

(Latter Prophets)

10. Isaiah
11. Jeremiah
12. Ezekiel
13. The Twelve³

C. WRITINGS

(Political Books)

14. Psalms
15. Proverbs
16. Job

(Five Rolls – Megilloth)

17. Song of Songs
18. Ruth
19. Lamentations
20. Ecclesiastes
21. Esther

(Historical Books)

22. Daniel
23. Ezra- Nehemiah
24. Chronicles

³ Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

During the development of the church the Canon grew to include the New Testament writings. To sift truth from error three widely recognized principles were applied to discern what was considered “Holy Scripture” and what was not. First, the writing had to have a recognized prophet or apostle as its author. Second, the writing could not contradict a previous passage of Scripture. Three, there had to be a wide consensus in the community of believers. This helps us to understand which books are in the Bible and which ones should be excluded.⁴

With regards to the Old Testament, there is some debate. The Catholic Church, for instance, upholds and affirms the Apocrypha – books which the Catholic Church views as authoritative but are not found in most Protestant Translations – as holy and authoritative. In addition, many scholars and religious groups speculate that the Gospel of Thomas and other rival New Testament works should be included as well.

- Why is it important to determine which books belong in the Bible?
- If we see the Bible as authoritative with regards to all matters to which it speaks, what role should it play in defining the Canon?

One should also keep in mind that the Scriptures make claims to their own canonicity. The Old Testament Canon seems to be settled by Jesus. In *Luke 11:51* Jesus states, “**from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah.**” Starting with Abel, the first martyr in the book of Genesis and ending with Zechariah, the last martyr in the last book of the Hebrew canon (Chronicles), Jesus lays out what he understood as the Hebrew canon. And this Canon excludes the Apocrypha which were not accepted by the Catholic Church until 1546 when they decisively affirmed the Canon of Augustine.⁵

Furthermore, the Old Testament canon closes itself until the opening of the New Testament. The prophecy of *Malachi 4:4-6* seems to suggest that God will send an Elijah to announce the advent of the Lord. Until then, revelation from God would cease. This silence lasted four centuries until the angel appeared to Zacharias in the temple (*Luke 1:11*). Given the deity of Christ, it is logical to assume that every word that He spoke was indeed inspired.

Christ also hints at the New Testament canon when he promises in *John 14:25-26* to give the disciples the Holy Spirit to “**teach you all things, and bring to remembrance all that I have said to you.**” The apostles, assisted by the Holy Spirit, were able to accurately comprehend and remember all things that Jesus had taught them. With that, they were able to teach and instruct the Church with all authority, since they were speaking on behalf of the Lord. Paul makes this very clear in *1 Cor. 14:37* where he teaches that one who is a prophet or spiritual will rightly recognize his commands as being from the Lord. In addition, there are several instances in which the apostles write with a commanding authority, and to disobey their words is to disobey God (*Gal. 1:9*). “[P]ortions of the New Testament were written with the expectation that they

⁴ Richard Mayhue *How to Study the Bible* (Ross-Shire: Christian Focus 2009), pp. 30-31.

⁵ One should note that the translator of the Latin Vulgate (the official interpretation of the Roman Catholic Church for centuries) did not affirm the canonicity of the Apocrypha.

were to be received and obeyed.”⁶ The authoritative tone of all of the Epistles testifies to their authenticity. The apostles played an intricate role in the formation of the canon. Not only did they testify to their own work as authoritative, they pointed to other New Testament Works as inspired as well.

Finally, the end of the Bible seems to close the canon. Jesus' statement at the end of Revelation (**Rev. 22:18-19**) states the sufficiency of the prophecies contained in the book to cover all future events. “The comprehensive scope of Revelation’s coverage of encouragement-parenthesis (**chaps 2-3**) and predictive elements (**chaps. 4-22**) and of the extensive time span from the first century to the eternal state also commends the view that **vv. 18-19** anticipate no more prophecy.”⁷ Just like Malachi prophesied a gap in revelation until the first advent, it follows that the next revelation of God will transpire during His second advent (**Joel 2:28**).

In conclusion, historical recognition seems to vindicate the canon, as there was stunning unanimity among the early church as to what belonged in the canon. The books that were excluded seemed to be rejected for good reason since they taught bizarre doctrine and strange practices that seemed to contradict the rest of the teachings of the Scriptures (i.e. the Didache taught baptismal regeneration, the Gospel of Thomas taught that Mary needed to become a man, etc.).

- Do we need the Catholic Church to validate the Canon? Why or why not?

V. Can I Understand the Bible?

In our postmodern world where “what the Bible means to me” is considered a legitimate interpretive principle, we should take a moment to study the clarity of Scripture. In other words, does God have a single message to communicate to us with each given text? In view of this we will define and discuss the Clarity of Scripture.

A. **Definition:** Wayne Grudem defines this as follows:

*The clarity of Scripture means that the Bible is written in such a way that its teachings are able to be understood by all who will read it seeking God’s help and being willing to follow it.*⁸

B. **Scriptural Support:**

⁶R. Laird Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Scriptures*. (Greenville, SC: A. Press, 1995), 234.

⁷Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8:22 An Exegetical Commentary*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 517.

⁸Wayne Grudem, “Systematic Theology” (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994,) p. 1204.

1. ***Deuteronomy 6:6-7*** “*These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up.*”
 - a. What is the general command in this passage?
 - b. How does this passage support the clarity of Scripture? (Hint: remember the audience)

2. ***Psalms 19:7*** *The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul; The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple.*
 - a. What does the term *simple* imply about the audience?
 - b. How does the Scripture’s impact on *the simple* affirm its clarity?

3. ***Matthew 21:42*** *Jesus said to them, “Did you never read in the Scriptures, ‘THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone; THIS CAME ABOUT FROM THE LORD, AND IT IS MARVELOUS IN OUR EYES’?”*
 - Did the fact that these Scriptures were written centuries before, and in a different cultural context, excuse the audience for their misunderstanding? Why or why not?

C. Why Do Some People Misunderstand Scripture?

When God-fearing Christians disagree on what Scripture teaches there are two possible explanations:

1. They are seeking to make affirmations where the Scriptures are silent.
2. They have misinterpreted the Word.

In both cases, the problem is not with the Scriptures themselves, but with our failure to correctly interpret the Bible.⁹

⁹ If you would like more info on how to correctly interpret the Bible consult: *How to Get the Most From God’s Word* by John MacArthur.

VI. Are their Mistakes in the Bible?

In recent years, modern scholarship has severely questioned the accuracy of the Scriptures. This has led some evangelical theologians to concede errors in the Bible with regards to dating, creation, etc. Yet they still maintain their evangelical faith by claiming that the Bible is infallible. In other words, while it may have errors, it speaks with perfect authority on matters of faith and practice.

- If someone affirms this position, what must they believe about the Bible? What must it contain?
- If the Bible has errors in regards to history, origin, etc., how can we be certain that it does not also err in its teachings about Christ?

A. Definition of Inerrancy:

The Chicago Statement on Inerrancy gives this brief definition:

*Being wholly and verbally God-given, Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching, no less in what it states about God's acts in creation, about the events of world history, and about its own literary origins under God, than in its witness to God's saving grace in individual lives.*¹⁰

Point of Clarification: Inerrancy pertains to the original manuscripts (autographs). To the extent that our copies and translations of the Scripture faithfully represent the original, they are inerrant.

B. Proof of Inerrancy:

1. Inerrancy can be proved through a simple syllogism.
 - a. God is true (**Rom. 3:4**)
 - b. Scripture is breathed out by God (**2 Tim. 3:16**)
 - c. The Scriptures must be true, because they were breathed out by God.
2. Christ Viewed the Scripture as Inerrant:

Matthew 5:17-20 "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Whoever then

¹⁰ As quoted in Wayne Grudem, "Systematic Theology" (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994,) p. 1204.

annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.”

- How does affirming every “smallest letter or stroke” uphold inerrancy?

3. Key passages depend on these “smallest letters” and “strokes”.

Matthew 22:43-45 He said to them, “Then how does David in the Spirit call Him ‘Lord,’ saying, ‘THE LORD SAID TO MY LORD, “SIT AT MY RIGHT HAND, UNTIL I PUT YOUR ENEMIES BENEATH YOUR FEET” ’? If David then calls Him ‘Lord,’ how is He his son?”

- What single word serves as the crux of the argument? How does this support inerrancy?

Matthew 22:32 ‘I AM THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, AND THE GOD OF ISAAC, AND THE GOD OF JACOB’. He is not the God of the dead but of the living.”

- Why is the verb tense so important to Jesus’ argument? Again, how does this support inerrancy?

C. Parameters of Inerrancy:

1. ***Inerrancy allows for variety in style.*** The gospel of John was written in the simple style one might expect of an unlearned fisherman; Luke was written with the more sophisticated vocabulary of an educated person; Paul’s epistles reflect the logic of a philosopher. All of these variations are entirely compatible with inerrancy.
2. ***Inerrancy allows for variety in details in explaining the same event.*** This phenomenon is particularly observed in the synoptic gospels. It is important to remember that Jesus spoke in Aramaic and the writers of Scripture wrote their accounts in Greek, meaning they had to translate the original words into Greek. Two writers would use slightly different words to describe the same incident, yet both would give the same meaning. There is an additional reason for variety in details: the various writers may have emphasized different aspects of an event in order to best convey their message. This would make the details appear different, yet both would be accurate.

3. ***Inerrancy does not demand verbatim reporting of events.*** “In times of antiquity it was not the practice to give a verbatim repetition every time something was written out.”¹¹
4. ***Inerrancy allows for departure from standard forms of grammar.*** Obviously it is wrong to enforce English rules of grammar upon the Scriptures.
5. ***Inerrancy allows for problem passages.*** With a work as vast as the Holy Scriptures it is nearly impossible to provide solutions to all the problems. In one case the solution awaits the findings of the archaeologist’s spade; in another case it awaits the linguist’s research; in still others the solution may never be discovered. It is never an option, however, to take our inability to solve every problem and suggest that there are contradictions or errors in Scripture. If the Scriptures are God-breathed they must be entirely without error.
6. ***Inerrancy demands the account does not teach error or contradiction.*** In the statements of Scripture, whatever is written is in accord with things as they are.¹²

VII. Thought Questions:

- A. How should knowing that the Bible was written in three languages (which naturally does not include King James English) impact how we study the Bible?
- B. How should knowing that the Bible was written in the ancient Near East 3,400 to 1,900 years ago impact our interpretation of the Bible? What elements should we think about as we try to garner the original meaning of the text?
- C. How should knowing that the Bible is free from error impact our Bible Study, especially when we see a “contradiction”?

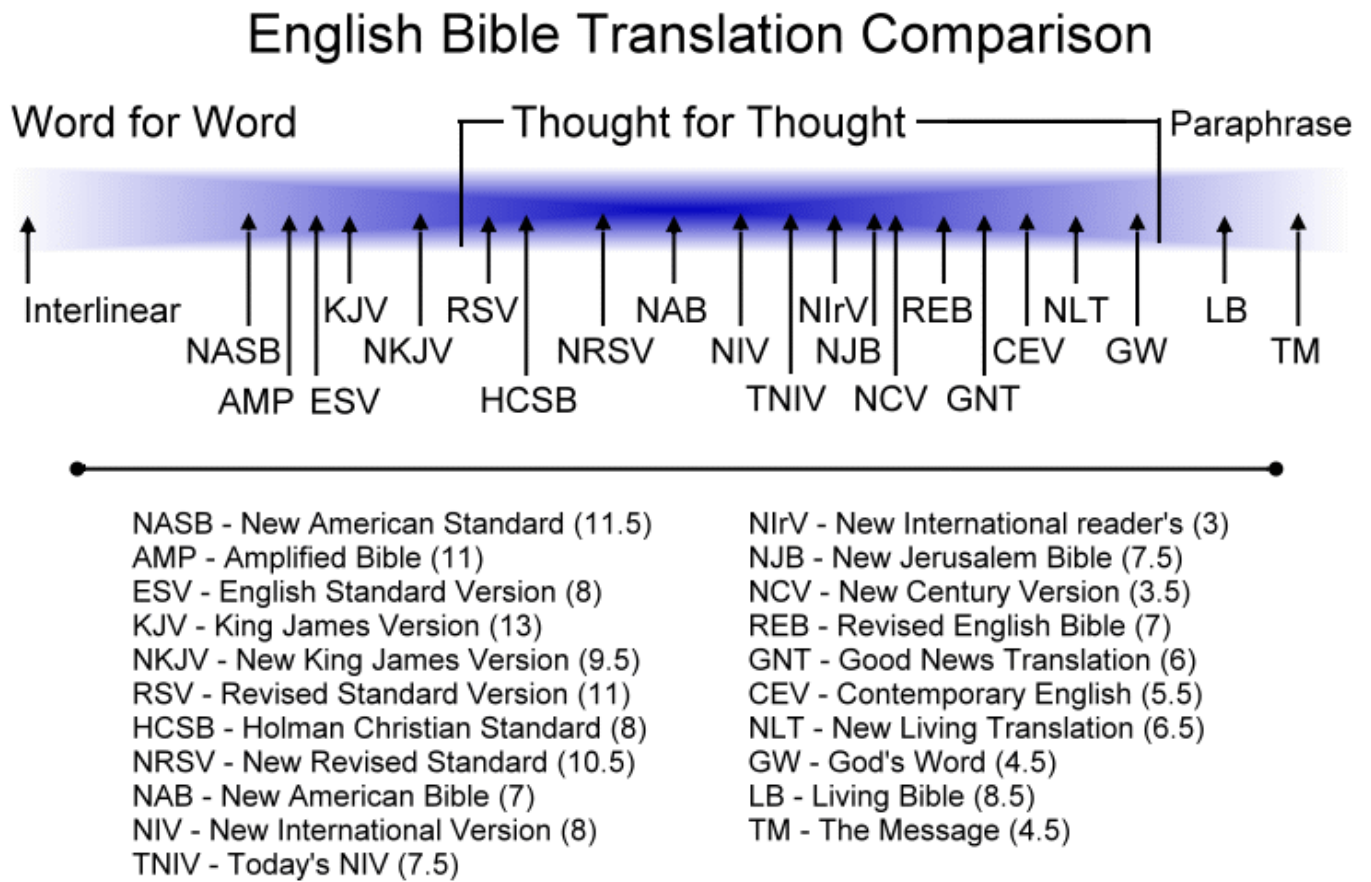
¹¹ A verbatim quote could not be demanded for several reasons. First, as already mentioned, the writer had to translate from Aramaic to Greek in recording Jesus’ words. Second, in making reference to Old Testament texts it would have been impossible to unroll the lengthy scrolls each time to produce a verbatim quote; furthermore, the scrolls were not readily available, hence, the freedom in Old Testament quotes.

¹²Enns, Paul P.: *The Moody Handbook of Theology*. Chicago, Ill. : Moody Press, 1997, c1989, S. 167

D. Knowing that the Bible was written by men moved along by the Holy Spirit, how should our study of the Bible differ from our study of Shakespeare?

VIII. Application:

Knowing the origin of the Bible should cause us to realize that while the translations are exceedingly accurate, they are translations none the less. Different translational theories lead to various interpretations (see chart below). Thus, we should not be overly reliant on one single translation. In addition, we should seek the assistance of dictionaries and commentaries gleaned from the wisdom of men who have a working knowledge of the original language.



(c) 2007 Brent MacDonald, LTM

This chart shows the style of Bible translation, ranging from Word for Word (Formal Equivalence), to Thought for Thought (Dynamic Equivalence) and Paraphrase. The numeric value shown in parenthesis following each translation name is the grade level of readability. This chart makes no assessment as to the quality of each translation and, in fact, includes at least one

translation with a strong Roman Catholic bias. While it does not cover every English translation, it does reference a majority of best sellers including many recent translations.¹³

IX. Assignment::

Read the Book of Titus three times. Each time read it in a different translation.

X. Conclusion:

The foundation of all theology rests upon the rock of the Word. What you believe about the Word will determine what you believe about Creation, the Resurrection, Salvation, and the Return of Christ. Yet the Scripture is more than just a theological tome. In the words of the author of Hebrews:

Hebrews 4:12 For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

May God give us a love and reverence for His Word so that we might pursue Him as you seek to understand the true meaning of Holy Scripture.

¹³ <http://www.notjustanotherbook.com/biblecomparison.htm>

Appendix

COMMON OBJECTIONS AND ANSWERS

- A. **Objection 1:** We don't have the original Bible. After all, it was written thousands of years ago and passed down through the centuries by men.

The guardianship of the Old Testament was entrusted to the Masoretes—Hebrew scholars who meticulously copied the Old Testament. Using such techniques as numbering the letters, words, and lines in each book, as well as identifying the middle word, they successfully maintained the Old Testament. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls confirmed the efforts of the Masoretes. When scholars compared the Isaiah Scroll, which was dated around 150 BC, with the Masoretic copy, which was dated around AD 900, they discerned ninety-five percent agreement between the two texts. The variants were obvious slips of the pen and variations in spelling.

Scholars, archeologists, and researchers have sifted through over 24,000 manuscripts related to the New Testament that date all the way back to the first half of the second century. By comparison, only 647 manuscripts of Homer's classic *Iliad* have been recovered. Through the science of textual criticism (comparing manuscripts of similar passages in order to detect human errors), scholars believe that we have at least ninety-eight percent of the New Testament accurately reconstructed. Of the remainder, it should be noted that it in no way interferes with orthodox (mainstream) Christian doctrine.

- B. **Objection 2:** Doesn't the Bible contradict itself?

Many people who carry this objection have never taken the time to actually read the Bible and see for themselves. For those who have found apparent contradictions, further study of the context of the passages often clears up these questions. For those who are seriously stumped, many books are available which can assist in resolving these apparent contradictions, such as Gleason Archer's *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* and Norman Geisler's *When Critics Ask*.

- C. **Objection 3:** What about other books of revelation, like the Koran?

First of all, unlike the Koran, the Bible consists of multiple authors, literary forms, and types of revelation and yet it maintains the same message. Secondly, books like the Koran and the Book of Mormon contain historical inaccuracies and misrepresent the Bible.¹⁴ Thirdly, the Bible has a proven track record of fulfilled prophecies.

Here are some examples:

¹⁴ For specific examples of the inaccuracies of the Koran and Book of Mormon consult: Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1994), pp. 549-556.

1. **Yet in spite of this, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them, nor will I so abhor them as to destroy them, breaking My covenant with them; for I am the LORD their God. (Leviticus 26:44)**

In the near context of this verse, Yahweh tells the Israelites that the Promised Land will be abandoned on account of their unfaithfulness. Yet, as we read in verse 44, the Lord will graciously preserve them while they are in the land of their enemies. This passage clearly alludes to the Babylonian exile, which transpired roughly 850 years later (see 2 Kings 17:6; 24:10-16).

2. **And Babylon, the beauty of kingdoms, the glory of the Chaldeans' pride, Will be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah. It will never be inhabited or lived in from generation to generation; Nor will the Arab pitch his tent there, Nor will shepherds make their flocks lie down there. (Isaiah 13:19-20)**

This prophecy was penned by Isaiah in the seventh century BC. At that time, Babylon was at its height and was a formidable military city. Yet today this once-prosperous city is a barren wasteland because of the extreme salinization of the surrounding farmland—a fulfillment of the words “Nor will shepherds make their flocks lie down there.” The reference to Arabs not pitching their tents on the site of this once-mighty city is significant because they did not inhabit the region until the eighth century AD.

3. The account of the suffering servant in Isaiah 52:13-15 and 53:1-12, composed during the late seventh century BC, offers a striking Old Testament portrait of the life and death of Christ. Phrases such as “He was pierced through for our transgressions” and “by His scourging we are healed” clearly point to the crucifixion of Christ and our spiritual salvation through His suffering on the cross.

For more examples of fulfilled biblical prophecy consult Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, pages 563-568.

Ultimately, the truth of the Bible will commend itself above and beyond any works such as the Koran. The wisdom of the Scriptures speaks for itself. When we adhere to its commands and precepts we will find that the testimony of the Word of God is true. However, we must be aware that the sinfulness, or deceitfulness, of our own hearts (see Jeremiah 17:9), may interfere with our ability to completely understand it. Jesus Christ leaves us with the following challenge in John 7:17: