

## How did the Bible get chapters and verses?

### 1. What were the writing materials available for ancient texts?

#### Papyrus

Because of its abundance in Egypt, papyrus was used as a writing surface as early as 3100 BC and for 4000 years following. It is believed that the original biblical autographs were written on papyrus although later Jewish scribes (Mishnah, Meg 2:2) prohibited its use for parchment when writing sacred texts.

The method of making papyrus has not changed in the thousands of years it has been used. The process starts with the removal of the papyrus reed skin to expose the inner pith, which was beaten and dried. It is then laid lengthwise, with subsequent layers cross-laid for strength and durability, and glued with a plant derivative. The final process involved the stretching and smoothing of the papyrus in preparation for its use. The average papyrus "page" was 22 cm wide and 29-33 cm (up to 47cm) long. A papyrus scroll was usually made of 20 "pages" averaging a total length of 4.5 meters.

The writing instrument was a *kalamos*, a pen fashioned from a reed with the tip chewed to form a brush. Often several *kalamos* were kept for varying brush widths and ink colors.

#### Clay

Clay tablets were used as far back as 3000 BC, and scholars have yet to decipher a vast quantity now in possession. Using clean, washed, smooth clay, scribes used a stylus to imprint wedge-shaped letters called *cuneiform*. The tablets, made in various shapes such as cone-shaped or flat, were sun dried or kiln fired. An example of a clay tablet is the famous Code of Hammurabi written before the time of Moses.

#### Parchment

Parchment was developed in Pergamum, a city in Asia Minor, sometime around 200-100 BC as the result of a rivalry between the King Ptolemy of Egypt and the King Eumenes of Pergamum over who had the largest and best library. To frustrate his rival and protect the status of the Alexandrian library, King Ptolemy placed an embargo on the export of papyrus. King Eumenes turned to craftsmen to find an alternative, which led to parchment.

Made from the skin of sheep, parchment was derived from the inner flesh lining of the skin split from the outer wool side. It was more durable than papyrus and difficult to forge; however, papyrus was cheaper and easier to manufacture.

### 2. What is *scripto continua*?

Because of the scarcity of papyrus outside of Egypt, the earliest manuscripts, which were non-biblical material, were written *scripto continua*, without any spaces between words or sentences, and it was likely that the original autographs of the Bible were written in a similar fashion. Examination of the early Greek texts also finds no upper and lower case distinction in lettering and an absence of punctuation until the ninth century AD.

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### 3. How did books, chapters, and verses, get introduced?

#### Books

The Hebrew Bible has 24 books based on the division of the books in the ancient Hebrew manuscripts. In contrast, the Bible has 39 books in the Old Testament based on the division of the books found in the "Septuagint" (Greek Translation of the Bible).

Both Bibles have the same books but simply divide them differently. They differ in the following manner:

Hebrew Bible	Bible (Old Testament)
Collection of books split into individual books	
The Twelve ( <i>Trei Asar</i> ) or Twelve Minor Prophets	Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malach
Books that are split into 2 smaller books	
Kings	1 Kings and 2 Kings
Chronicles	1 Chronicles and 2 Chronicles
Samuel	1 Samuel and 2 Samuel
Ezra or Ezra-Nehemiah	Ezra and Nehemiah

There is debate if the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) was once one book by itself, and in the making of the Septuagint, was divided into the 5 books. The Greek name *pentateuchos*, implying a division of the law into five parts, occurs for the first time about 150-75 AD in the letter to Flora by Ptolemy.

#### Chapters

Early manuscripts indicate that the books of the Bible had some form of divisions. Evidence suggests the possibility that Hebrew manuscripts divided the Pentateuch into 54 sections called *parashiyot* during the Babylonian Captivity (before 536 BC). Each parashah was read on the Sabbath day; thus, the Pentateuch was read completely in a year. These parashiyot were later divided into 669 *sidrim*. Other books of the Hebrew Bible had similar divisions such as the Prophets, which were divided into passages called *haphtaroth*.

## How did the Bible get chapters and verses? (page 3)

Another form of division also existed when there was a change in subject and was denoted by the *open section*, which was either a blank or open remainder of an unfilled line of text or a blank line before a new full line. Minor changes in thought were indicated by the *close section*, which was only a short interval of space.

In later manuscripts, the open section was indicated by *Pe* (the Hebrew “p”) and the close section by the *Samech* (the Hebrew “s”).

However, despite these two forms of divisions, parashiyot and open section, the earliest Hebrew manuscripts did not have any division into numbered or alphabetical chapters.

Early Greek and Latin versions of the Bible had similar divisions in several books. Stephen Langton (1155/56 – 1228) in 1205, as a Paris theological professor, was the first to make chapter divisions to facilitate his work with Bible commentaries. He later became the Archbishop of Canterbury and was a prolific writer of commentaries and biblical essays, which introduced his chapters. In 1240, Cardinal Hugo of St. Cher published the first Latin Bible with the chapter divisions that exist today. The Jews started using these chapter divisions in 1330 for their Hebrew Bible.

### Verses

In the oldest Hebrew manuscripts (Masoretic), the Old Testament was divided into verses; however, the verses were not numbered. The verses were marked by the *soph pasuq*, which is a double point ( : ). In the Pentateuch of these ancient Masoretic texts, the number of verses of a parashah would be written at the end of the parashah. This notation helped the scribe make an accurate copy, specifically to guard against the addition of verses, and helped the teacher read and remember all the verses of the parashah.

It is theorized that the history of the Hebrew text goes as follows: 1) scripto continua, 2) the separation of words and the introduction of vowel-letters, and 3) verse division.

Jewish rabbi philosopher, Isaac Nathan ben Kalonymus, adopted Langton’s chapter divisions of the Old Testament and numbered the verses according to the verse divisions indicated by the *soph pasuq*. In 1523, he wrote the first Bible concordance in Hebrew, the “Meïr Netib,” to facilitate the study of Biblical exegesis and to prevent Jews from converting to Christianity. It may be worthwhile to note that the verse numbers in Hebrew Bibles are at times off by one or more verses from the English verse numbers, because Christian Bibles do not count introductory verses (i.e. Hebrew Bible Psalm 20:2 is the same verse as the Christian Bible Psalm 20:1).

Robert Stephanus (also known as Robert Estienne), a Protestant book printer living in France, printed Greek and Latin Bibles that French ecclesiastical authorities considered heretical. As he fled with his family to Geneva on horseback, he arbitrarily made verse divisions of the New Testament within Langton’s chapter divisions. In 1555, Stephanus printed his first Latin Bible with his New Testament verse system.

However, Stephanus’ work was not the first Bible printed with New Testament verse divisions. In 1538, seventeen years earlier, a Latin Bible was printed with different verse divisions, but it was Stephanus’ version that was used for the first English Bible - The Geneva New Testament of 1557, which became the verse system used today.

## How did the Bible get chapters and verses? (page 4)

Tip: In understanding how chapters and verses came to the Bible, it is important to realize that they were completely arbitrary. They were not applied with any logical or consistent method, do not represent literary units, and do not define the author's unit of thought. The Bible was not intended to be read in bits and pieces! Chapters and verses are simply a reference point and should not be used to influence the interpretive approach of the Bible student!

### Approximations

	Old Testament	New Testament	Bible
Number of words	647,000	198,000	845,000
Number of verses	22,485	7,957	30,442
Number of chapters	929	260	1189
Number of books	39	27	66

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