

A Study of Chapter and Verse Additions in The Bible

Recently, I read an article which discussed the chapter and verse divisions in our modern Bibles. I found the article "Dividing the Word" by Martin Pickup to be interesting and many of his warnings to be justified. Also, I want to add a few words to this discussion. Most of the information on the history of chapter and verse division come from the above-mentioned article.

Division of The Scriptures Through History

The Dead Sea Scrolls show us that, well before the time of Jesus, Jewish copyists divided the books of the OT into sections (called *parashot*) according to the logical sense of the text.... By reading a *parashah* each week in the synagogue, the entire Torah could be completed in a year. To accommodate a three-year reading cycle, Palestinian Jews divided the text into 154 smaller units (called *sederim*). Each of these units was approximately the same length; quantity of material rather than subject matter was the determining factor.

Early Christian copyists also began to segment the books of the NT. By the fourth century, it was common for Christian scribes to denote shifts in subject matter by dividing a NT book into sections (called *kephalaia*). These divisions of the text were determined subjectively; different copyists divided a given book differently.

The chapter divisions of our modern Bibles stem from a system created in the early 13th century by Stephen Langton, a Catholic scholar who later became the archbishop of Canterbury. Langton divided the entirety of the Latin Vulgate into chapters so that readers could easily locate a given portion of the text. Langton's reference system proved to be so helpful that Jewish rabbis added his chapter divisions into Hebrew manuscripts of the OT. This standardized reference system greatly facilitated Jews and Christians as they engaged one another in religious debate during the 14th and 15th centuries.

The division of a Biblical book into very small segments, or verses, is a practice that originated with Masoretic Jews of the Middle Ages. When the Masoretes produced Hebrew manuscripts of the OT books, they indicated a full stop by inserting a space (and later various symbols) into the text... Printed Hebrew Bibles of the 16th century then began to include numerals to designate the verses of each chapter. The first person to versify the chapters of NT books was Dominican scholar Santi Pagnini in 1527, but his system of numbered verses was never widely adopted.

The NT system of versification that we have in our modern Bibles was developed in the 16th century by Robert Estienne, a French printer who went by the moniker Robert Stephanus. Intent on producing a more functional concordance than Hugo's before him, one with a more precise reference system, Stephanus published a Greek–Latin NT in 1551 that divided each chapter of a NT book into numbered verses. Four years later, he published a complete Latin Bible, using the Hebrew versification for the OT books, and his own versification for the NT books. The first English Bible to insert both chapter and verse divisions into the text was the Geneva Bible, published in 1560. Subsequent printed Bibles in Latin, English, and other languages followed suit.

The warning of the writer was that some people might not realize chapter and verse divisions are not part of the original text but man made. Thus, some of those divisions are rather arbitrary and can be confusing, changing the way we might read the text. For instance, Genesis 2.1-3 is really a summation of Genesis 1. Thoughts of Romans 14 continues on into chapter 15. Then there are the verse divisions which at times are in the middle of sentences and even thoughts.

He then added the fact that certain things people think are really important due to the chapter and verse divisions. For instance, "Jesus wept" (John 11.35), or the middle chapter of the Bible, or the middle verse of the Bible, or the longest sentence in the Bible, etc. which may be interesting in a Bible trivia game but of no real value in studying the Bible.

However, before we all take markers and blot out those chapter and verse divisions, we must understand they are much like the punctuation in our Bibles. Inspired writers did not write with comma's, periods, or question marks. Those *italicized* words in our Bibles are not in the original text either. The one point of disagreement I have with the above article quoted is the idea chapter and verse divisions are an alternation of the text itself.

"Laudable as these helps may be, it is important to recognize that they are still manmade alterations of the text. Bible readers need to be aware of the ways in which they can negatively affect our reading of God's word."

Chapter and verse divisions do not change the words themselves. Pointed out in the article is how they change how we read the text. There is a difference and the Bible student must be able to understand how a thought continues from one verse or chapter to the next.

The usefulness of these divisions has been helpful in our studies as we can inform the audience, or class of fellow Bible students where the text is. Imagine telling someone to turn almost two thirds of the way in Matthew until they see a sentence starting with “Then Peter answered”. Instead, I can say turn to Matthew 17.4. --
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(The full article “Dividing the Word” can be found at
<https://focusmagazine.org/dividing-the-word-of-truth.php>)