



A (VERY) BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE BIBLE

The word 'bible' comes from the Greek word τὰ βιβλία (tà biblíā) meaning 'the books'. The Christian Bible, as we know it, is a collection of religious texts that were written over a period of some 1600 years, by more than forty authors in three different languages and across several continents. Because of such diversity, the context and purpose of each one of the individual books in the

Bible varies. In the Christian tradition, we believe that the Bible has special value in our lives because it tells a story of God's interaction with the world and of the people who follow God.

A list of books chosen to be part of the Bible is called a 'biblical canon', with the word 'canon' derived from the Greek word κανών (kanón), meaning 'rule', as in 'an instrument by which to measure', like a ruler. Different Christian traditions make use of different biblical canons, such as the Catholic Church (whose Bible includes 73 books) and the Greek Orthodox Church (whose Bible includes 76 books). The Church of England in Article VI of the Thirty-nine Articles: "Of the sufficiency of the holy scriptures for salvation" states that "... the other Books (*as Hierome saith*) the Church doth read for example of life and instruction of manners; but yet doth not apply them to establish any doctrine..." thereby authorizing the use of the Apocryphal books. In the Protestant biblical canon, the Bible consists of 66 books, divided into the Old and New Testaments.

The Jewish (Hebrew) Scriptures

Many religions have a book or books which are considered holy or authoritative. They are often called 'Scripture', which simply means something that is written, but is usually used of sacred writings. Jews often divide their Scriptures into three parts: the Torah (the first five books (the 'Pentateuch' in Greek: Genesis to Deuteronomy, also known as the Teaching), the Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah etc...and the Writings (including the Psalms, Proverbs etc...)). These Scriptures describe God's involvement in the lives of individuals as well as in world history. They relate how mankind's relationship with God has been broken and how God has started to restore this through a 'covenant' (which means a binding agreement) with Israel, which would one day extend to the whole world. The Hebrew Scriptures also contain prophecies of a coming Anointed One ('Messiah' in Hebrew and 'Christ' in Greek).

The Christian Scriptures

Christians believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah prophesied in the Hebrew Scriptures. Hence he is often described by his name and title: Jesus (*var. Joshua*) Christ (*Messiah/Anointed One*). Christians believe that Jesus came to fulfil the Hebrew Scriptures and to introduce a 'new covenant' which would include all people in a new relationship with God. Various accounts of the life of Jesus, and the activities of the early church were first spread by word of mouth ('Oral Period') and only later written by some of the very first Christians. Some quickly came to be seen as holy Scripture by Christians, ranking alongside the Hebrew Scriptures.

An archaic word for covenant is 'Testament', which led to the Hebrew Scriptures being called the 'Old Testament' in contrast to the 'New Testament' of the Christian Scriptures, with both together forming the Christian Bible. Most Christians see the Bible as being authoritative for what they are to believe and how they are to live.

What's in the Bible?

The word 'Bible' comes from the Greek and Latin words for book or books. But within the set of covers that we call our Bible, there are collected together 66 individual books: 39 books in the Old Testament, 27 books in the New Testament plus 14 in the Apocrypha. The Old Testament is written mostly in Hebrew, the language of the Jewish people (with a few parts in Aramaic). The New Testament is written entirely in Greek, the common language of the time. The Books called the Apocrypha were originally attached to the Greek Old Testament that were not in the Hebrew-written Bible. That is because they were "first-written" in the Greek language. They were considered scripture and used as such by the Jews of the Dispersion (Jews living in foreign countries) at the time of Christ.

About 60 years after the crucifixion of Christ, a group of Rabbi's (survivors of the Roman annihilation of Jerusalem) met at Jamnia and canonized some Hebrew scriptures that were specifically devoid of Greek writings. Any work of scripture not originally written in Hebrew was discarded as unclean.

This codification of the Hebrew Bible by the Jewish Rabbi's cancelled for the Jews the authority, not only of the contested books we now call apocryphal, but also the popular Greek Old Testament itself that foreign Jews had been using for the previous 300 years. That work had earlier been authorized for publication by the Jewish Sanhedrin in Jerusalem for use by the Jews of the Dispersion whose language was primarily Greek. Jamnia was a seminal decision because it isolated Christians from Jews on the basis, not just of scripture, but of language as well. The early Christians stuck to the Greek Old Testament and the Jews concentered themselves on the Hebrew Old Testament decided on by the Rabbi's at Jamnia.

The Old Testament

The 39 Old Testament books were written over a long period of time, perhaps as much as 1000 years, from about 1500 BC to the middle of the fifth century BC. The books include historical accounts, lists of laws, poetry, songs, prophecy and other types of writing. These accounts were not collected together merely because they were thought to be of historical interest, but because they were believed to show how God was at work in and through his people Israel.

The New Testament

The 27 New Testament books were written over a period of about 50 years. The exact dates for all of them are not known, but the earliest probably dates from some time in the AD40's. Before that came the 'oral' period when people simply passed on stories, accounts and the words of Jesus until the time came when these needed to be written down. But 'telling the story' remained necessary for centuries as most people were unable to read. Four books are effectively biographies of Jesus – called Gospels. Three are similar (synoptic) whilst John's is somewhat distinct. The author of Luke also wrote an account of the early church and its preaching called the Acts of the Apostles. One book, called Revelation, is a highly symbolic account of the end of the world. The rest of the books are letters written to various Christian churches with encouragement, criticism and advice, many being written by Paul, who was one of the most important early Christian missionaries.

The Apocrypha

'Apocrypha' comes from a Greek word meaning 'things that are hidden, secret.' It refers to two collections of ancient Jewish and Christian writings that have certain affinities with the various books of the Old Testament and New Testament but were not canonized by Christians as a whole: the Old Testament Apocrypha (e.g. Tobit, Judith, the Additions to Esther, the Additions to Daniel (the Prayer of Azariah and the Three Young Men, Susanna, and Bel and the Dragon), the Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus (also called Sirach), Baruch etc...), which are viewed as canonical by most Christians, and

the New Testament Apocrypha (eg. Shepherd of Hermas, Third Epistle to the Corinthians, Epistles of Clement, etc...) which are not held as such by most – but not all – churches. These, and many more documents, witness to the way that Christianity spread throughout both east and west and began to assimilate with the other religions it encountered. There are, probably, many documents now lost that helped shape the church in lands now regarded as Islamic (eg. Persia, Iraq, Saudi Arabia) but which had churches under local bishops – including in China – but have lost their Christian heritage.

Who wrote the Bible?

Many different authors wrote or contributed to the books in the Bible. Many of the books do not explicitly name their author, although in some cases it is clear. In many other cases, the author is unknown or is known only from sources outside the Bible. Some of the books are edited works, collecting together or ordering older material, such as the Psalms which are attributed to a number of different authors, including King David. Whilst Muslims claim that the Koran is the 'word of God', for Christians that 'Word' is, obviously, revealed in Christ. Although the bible has an important place in the life of the Church it cannot have the same place for Christians as the Koran has for Muslims.

However, most Christians would agree that the Bible itself assumes that God chooses to reveal himself to us and to involve himself in our individual lives and wider histories. But as it was never 'given' to the Church in the same way that the Koran was given to Mohammed it cannot 'teach' although it does bear witness to certain teachings and is regarded as being inspired by God and, in places, containing the words of God. It needs to be remembered that the early Church decided which of the many writings could be accepted as 'canonical' at the Council of Rome (392). Most Orthodox Christians accept the canon agreed by the Second Council of Trullo of 692. There was no one Bible before these Councils.

With the Old Testament Jews began to realise that certain books were authoritative, seeing these as inspired by God. In the same way, Christians came to recognise the books that now form the New Testament as equally authoritative. This was more a realisation that these books were, in some way, special and different, rather than a specific decision as to which books to adopt as Scripture. Hence most Christians recognise the Bible as actually written down by human beings, using their own knowledge, language and individual style, but equally inspired by God.

Where are the Original Documents?

We don't have them! But they were copied – and copies made of those copies and so on until we have the documents that do still exist. The originals wore out or were lost, but the various copies persisted. Whenever a document is copied by hand (and that was the only way at the time) there is the possibility of errors creeping into the resulting text. Most of these are irrelevant to the meaning, but the issue needs to be considered. A whole area of study called 'Textual Criticism' attempts to study the different texts that remain and compare and contrast the differences to work out the most likely original. But in the vast majority of cases, we are not talking about huge differences that dramatically affect the overall meaning.

In the New Testament, about 80% of the differences between different manuscripts are found to be in spelling (remember that even during William Shakespeare's lifetime, his name was spelt in many different ways – even sometimes in the same document), while others use synonyms or give changes in word order (which in Greek makes less difference to meaning than in English). Most of these, in fact, make no difference to the resulting translation into English or other languages. Very few variations between documents affect the actual meaning or make any significant difference to what Christians believe.

As one example of the ability of those copying the Old Testament documents, we can look at the book of the prophet Isaiah. An almost complete copy was found in 1947 in the Dead Sea Scrolls, dating back to the first century BC. When compared to the earliest copy that was previously available, dating from a thousand years or so later, the translators of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible found it necessary to make only three changes to their updated translation. These changes were equivalent to the difference between spelling Saviour as Saviour (British and American spellings).

The original New Testament documents are also lost, but the copies we do have are very close to the date of writing – perhaps 50 to 100 years difference. Compared to most other works of ancient history, the validity of which are rarely questioned, this gap is minute. The works of Julius Caesar, for example, written in the first century BC, only survive in less than a dozen copies dating from about AD 800 – a gap of some 850 years. By contrast, there are many thousands of New Testament documents in the original Greek (not all of these give the whole of the New Testament, of course), as well as many more in translations into various languages, as well as quotations in other early writers.

(From various sources inc. Queens Park Govanhill Parish Church, Glasgow)
