

Bible Part 1: The origin and formation of the Bible

No other book has influenced the world more than the Bible. For several decades the Bible was the bestselling book in the world. Even with such high acclaim the Bible still remains one of the most controversial books of all time. Unlike the books that cause scandal or conspiracy theories, the Bible's controversiality comes from its interpretation, which affects almost every nation and around 2.38 billion people. In this session we will explore the origins of the Bible, the history of its controversy, and the main parts of the Bible.

Where did the Bible come from?

In order to address this question we need to split the Bible into its two major sections: The Old Testament, aka. the Hebrew Bible, and the New Testament. These two sections of the Bible have a very different history and formation process.

The Old Testament:

The events of the Old Testament begin somewhere around 1800 BC. Although this date is rather controversial, the major events of the Old Testament occur between 1000 BC and 300 BC. The start of the Abraham's story is dated to 1800 BC. At this point in the story of the Jewish people everything was passed down through stories. One generation after another would repeat the stories of their ancestors without any written record. The first written record, which is also rather controversial, occurs between 1200 and 1000 BC. By around 800 BC some of the events of the Old Testament were beginning to have written origins. The first texts to be written were hymns and liturgical texts. These texts were central to worship and therefore needed a written analogue to aid worship. The exact number of books and which books in particular were written by the turn of the 6th century is hotly debated by scholars.

Enter the exile. Around 586 BC the land of Assyria and Babylon conquered the Land of Israel and sent the inhabitants, the Jews, into exile. While in exile everything changed. Without temple worship, sacrifices, and the standard way of life they were accustomed to, their way of life had to change. This change resulted in the writing of the stories that were told orally up until this point with a special emphasis on the laws and the interpretations of the laws, namely the prophets. By the time the Israelites returned from exile most of the major books that we are familiar with were written, i.e. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Judges, Joshua, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 King, 1 and 2 Chronicles, all of the prophetic literature and some of the wisdom literature. After returning from exile, a whole new style of worship was celebrated, one centering on the written text and not on oral tradition, aka. the Pharisaic tradition or the Talmudic tradition.

Several books still remain, and the most controversial books. The previously named books were held in high esteem and considered the undisputed canon of the Old Testament throughout the course of history, The word canon means ruler. Thus the canon of Scripture is the list of books that "measure out" to what we call the Bible. Yet, more happened after the Israelites returned from exile, namely 500 more years until the events of the New Testament. Around the turn of the 3rd century a new power was growing in the west: Greece. Greece would become the ultimate rival to the Persian empire and send them back east while conquering everything up to India.

With Greece now the dominant power in Israel, the Greek culture and language was imposed upon the people conquered by the Greeks. Several more books were included in the canon of Scripture that were not written in Hebrew but in Greek. These books include: Wisdom, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Tobit, Judith, Sirach, Baruch, and a chunk of Ester and Daniel. After the conquest of the Persian Empire, and more importantly the Land of Israel, King Ptolemy II wanted to build a library of all the texts from the Empire, called the Library of Alexandria. As part of that collection he wanted a copy of the Jewish scriptures in Greek. Although some of these books were already in Greek, others were not. He requested 72 scholars (70) to translate the Hebrew texts into Greek. This text became known as the Septuagint or the 70 after the Greek word for 70, Septuagint. The Christian church then adopted the Greek translation of the Hebrew text as the core books and translation of what became the Old Testament.

The New Testament

The origin and formation of the New Testament is much more complicated and strange. After the death of Jesus in 33 AD the vast majority of Christians either went into hiding or scattered across the world to spread the message. As they spread, many things happened. One group, called the Gnostics, headed into the desert to celebrate the special knowledge they felt that Jesus gave them. This group wrote the texts called the Gnostic Gospels which includes the Gospel of Mary of Magdala, The Gospel of Judas, and the Gospel of James. One of the most common forms of writing that cycled around the Near East was letters. Upon St. Paul's conversion his main form of shepherding and instructing the churches he founded was letters. Although most of the letters of the New Testament are St. Paul's writing, he wrote many more letters than those included. He even mentions these letters in his letters. Around the year 70, the Christians realized that Jesus wasn't coming back as soon as they thought. As a way to preserve the teachings and life of Jesus, they began to write these events and sayings down into books called Gospels. The Gospels are texts that relate the good news that Jesus suffered, died, and rose from the dead to save us from our sins; that Jesus is victorious over sin and death. The word "gospel" is the same word used when a runner tells the king that the army was victorious in battle. We must recognize the connection that the early Christians were making. The books termed "gospels" are proclamations of victory." Even around the same time that the Gospels were being written, they continued to write and send many more letters.

The origin of the Gospels is rather straightforward. Most scholars believe that the first Gospel was Mark around 68 AD. Usually the shortest and most succinct account comes first and then others elaborate on it. Some argue that Matthew's Gospel was the first written. Luke came third around 85 AD. John's Gospel was last around 90-100AD. Each of these Gospels were written in a specific Christian community with a specific audience in mind. Although they have a lot of the same content, their intended audience and specific focuses vary with John's Gospel varying the most. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called Synoptic Gospels since they are written with the same style and structure, synoptic meaning "seeing as one." John's Gospel has a totally different focus and structure compared to the other three. These four Gospels were not the only writing called Gospels of the early age of the Church. Some estimate between 10 and 40 other texts called Gospels were roaming around the ancient world.

So why only four? Or why not only one? These two questions are pivotal to understanding the early church and the formation of the Bible. The text we now consider the canon of the New Testament and even those that we have recently discovered were commonly read during the liturgies of the early church. As they were being read, reflected upon, and prayed with, the people would have a sense of their authenticity to the life and ministry of Jesus. Those who were considered authentic remained in the liturgy and those deemed non-authentic were removed. This process continued until the 4th century. At the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, the council codified, canonized, the New Testament. Two points of this process are worth noting. The Council chose to include 4 Gospels and not more or less. You would assume that fewer would be better. I don't have exact information as to why the Council chose 4, but I can make some guesses. Almost every heretic of the first six centuries of the church based their heresy off of only *one* Gospel. The church realized the problem of having only one interpretation of Jesus' life and thus included some other perspectives. We have to also remember that the early Church wanted to preserve as many texts as were considered authentic. If all four Gospels are authentic, then choose all four. This gives a broader perspective on the life and ministry of Jesus and helps us to see a more full picture of what he did than simply one perspective. Nevertheless, we have four Gospels, with four perspectives. The Book of Revelation, the final book of the Bible, has caused a stir over the centuries. Some argue that it should not be included due to its confusing style and difficulty to interpret. Yet, if you look at the Bible as a who and the Book of Revelation, you will quickly see its value and importance in Scripture. The Bible begins with the story of creation and ends with its recreation. Thus the Bible contains the entire story of salvation history; everything God is going to do from beginning to end. Revelation is the only book that shows God revealing himself to the world that the effects of this revelation. The final events of the book is the only place in Scripture where the nuptial imagery of Jesus and the Church are prominent and explicit. Without the Book of Revelation the story of salvation would have no end and the story of Jesus would not be fulfilled.

The final letters of the Bible, although not from St. Paul, were also included during the Council of Nicaea. These letters became much more controversial around the 16th century than at any point prior. On a final note about the letters. Some scholars and believers hold that the letters of the New Testament were all written by St. Paul. Very little evidence suggests that *all* the letters were written by St. Paul. Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, Philippians, Philemon. The other letters – 2 Thessalonians, Ephesians, Titus, Colossians – are more disputed. The letters of Peter and the letters of John are considered non-Pauline and the Letter to the Hebrews is a totally different ball game.

The Bible through history

After the Council of Nicaea declared the canon of Scripture in 325, minor disputes occurred throughout Christendom for the next few centuries and generally died away by the turn of the 6th century. These disputes ranged from whether a book should be included or whether a book was really part of the canon. These groups were rather small with the vast majority of the Christian world accepted the cannon proposed by the Council of Nicaea.

St. Jerome, a 4th century priest and doctor of the church, revolutionized the world by translating the Scriptures from Greek to Latin. Not only did he translate them, but he created a translation that included the Hebrew, Greek, and Latin side-by-side on the same piece of paper allowing people to compare the translations. His work, called the Vulgate, became the first attempt to translate the Bible into the spoken language of the people. The word “vulgate” comes from the Latin word for common, this is where we get the word vulgar from. The Vulgate became the standard translation of the Scriptures for the West from the point of its completion until the neo-vulgate was translated in 1979.

The next major movement in the history of the Bible started in the 14th century. By this point in history Latin was the language of the scholars and few common people spoke that language. A small but vocal group were advocating for the translation of the Bible into the common language of the people. Some groups had already begun this translation including some monks and, most notably, King Henry VIII. Translating the Bible into the common language was a way of allowing the people to hear and access the texts but also, in some cases, was a way of challenging the authority of the Church which forbade this practice. By the 16th century enough people were interested in the translation of the Bible in common language that it was already happening. Most notably the reformers, Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and Wesley, had begun a movement not only to bring the Bible to the language but to address the Bible as a whole. As these people were translating the Bible into common language, they weren't choosing the Vulgate as their common text but returning to the Hebrew and Greek texts. This “return to the sources” mentality caused confusion and questions regarding not only translation errors but also about the origins of certain books. Old Testament books that were written in Greek were not included in the Hebrew canon. New Testament books that were not written by Paul were called into question including the Letter of James and the Book of Revelation. Thus began a whole new era of biblical study focusing on the original languages, original sources, and a questioning of the canon and translations.

What is in the Bible?

Even though the main core of the Bible is broken into two main sections, these sections are broken into further categories.

The Old Testament

The Old Testament consists of four main categories of books: the Torah or Pentateuch, the historical books, the prophetic books, and the wisdom books.

The Torah or Pentateuch consists of the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. These books are called the Books of Law. Torah in Hebrew means law and Pentateuch means “five books.” These five books form the core of the laws of the Old Testament and the laws for the Jewish people. No other books of the Bible have a higher place or authority for the Jews. The Books of Genesis, Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy tell the story of the people from Abraham to their entrance into the Promised Land. Half of Exodus, half of Numbers, and the book of Leviticus contain all the laws. These five books have a structure to them:

Genesis – from Eden to Egypt

Exodus – from Egypt to Mount Sinai

Leviticus – the laws

Numbers – from Sinai into the desert

Deuteronomy – from the desert to the Promised Land

The Historical Books

These books chronicle the story of the Jewish people. Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, and 1 and 2 Chronicles tell the story of the people in the Promised Land as they make a society and civilization. Ruth tells the story of a non-Israelite who becomes an Israelite by marriage. Nehemiah and Ezra tell the story of the people's return from exile. 1 and 2 Maccabees tells the story of the Greek conquest and rule of Israel.

The Prophetic Books

The prophetic books are divided into three main categories: pre-exile prophets, exilic prophets, and post-exile prophets. The pre-exile prophets include Amos, Hosea, Nahum, Habakkuk, Isaiah 1-39, and Micah. The exilic prophets include Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah 40-55. The post-exilic prophets include Isaiah 56-66, Haggai, Zechariah, Zephaniah, Malakai, Joel, Obediah. Two more books are considered prophetic books even though their style is vastly different from the other books: Jonah and Daniel. The pre-exilic prophets prophesy about the impending doom if Israel continues to choose against God's laws. The exilic prophets focus on keeping the people focused on God while they live out their punishment in a foreign land or await God's redemption. The post-exilic prophets focus on either the joy of returning or the future restoration when God will make everything new again.

Prophetic literature is some of the most complicated texts of the Bible. Prophets are not fortune tellers or future tellers. They are people who heard God speak and acted as his mouthpiece for the people. Their role was to call people back to fidelity to God and the covenant. Prophets performed strange acts and foretold doom to get the people's attention. For the most part they were scorned or hated because of their preaching.

The Wisdom Books

These books are written for the purpose of exploring the nature of God or his ways. Each book is challenging to read and contain rather deep and sophisticated ideas. These books include Wisdom aka the Wisdom of Solomon or Ecclesiasticus, The Book of Sirach, Ecclesiastes, The Book of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Songs or Song of Solomon. A majority of these books were written during the Greek age and are therefore originally in Greek.

The New Testament

The Gospels

The Gospels are proclamations of the good news that Jesus was victorious over sin and death. The original context of a gospel is the runner who returns from war to announce to the king that the army was victorious. Thus the Gospels are accounts telling us of Jesus victory over sin and death. They are not biographies.

The Letter

As the name implies these are letters. Letters are a form of literature in which a person writes to a specific community with an intention in mind. We need to think this way to understand St. Paul's letters and the letters of the New Testament. Each of these letters were written to a specific community, with the exception of the Letter to the Hebrews, with a specific point that the writer wants to make. In order for us to fully appreciate these letters we would need to understand the historical context of the letter and the reasons for writing the letter.

Apocalyptic literature

Although everyone turns to the book of Revelation whenever the idea of apocalypse or apocalyptic literature is mentioned, several books of the Bible are classified as apocalyptic literature including the Book of Daniel, the Prophet Zechariah, and the Prophet Malachi. These texts focus on the "unveiling" of the mystery of God or the "revealing" of who God is. Thus their strange and cryptic messages are a result of the challenges in expressing the immensity of God and his grandeur. The main point they want to make is that God is beyond our imagining.