

Bible History

Deuteronomy 6:4-9Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. ⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶ Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷ Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸ Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹ and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

2 Timothy 3:14-17But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, ¹⁵ and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

Matthew 7:11-12If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him! ¹² "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.

Bible History

Last week we looked at the Bible and considered how the Bible isn't a continuous story, it isn't homogenous at all. Instead it's a collection of a lot of different things. It includes stories about our ancestors in the faith and stories about their relationship with God. It has poetry that is filled with praise for God, poetry that is filled with complaints to God, and erotic poetry that can make you blush. There are laws and rules and sound bites of wisdom. One way to keep all of this literary diversity in mind is to think of the Bible as the Family Scrapbook of the faith, the collection of memories of the children of God.

George Santayana, a twentieth century philosopher, is famous for saying that "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."¹ During the past year, many dictators who thought that it made no difference how cruel or oppressive they were, were surprised when people rebelled and overthrew them. Those dictators had forgotten that the aristocracy of France, of Russia, and the ruling wealthy of other cultures have ignored the plight of the ignorant, poor and hungry only to be shocked when the masses rose up and threw them out. Those who didn't know their history made false assumptions. Similarly, those who don't know the history of the Bible are very likely to make false assumptions.

The Bible is in two major parts, usually called the Old Testament and the New Testament. That's a big hint that all of the Bible wasn't written at the same time – there's an older part and a newer part. In our world today we put a lot of value on new as opposed to old. Old clothes are out of style, and they might require starching and ironing. Old houses may not have adequate insulation and may need a lot of repair and maintenance. We think of new as better, faster, stronger, and less trouble. Because of the connotations of old and new, some have suggested that it affects how we think about the two major parts of the Bible. Unconsciously we might think, if we have a New Testament, we don't need an Old Testament. But if we don't know our history, our old testament, we can fail to understand our new testament correctly. Try to remember that old and new are about the sequence in time, not the relative value of the two parts of the Bible.

We call the writings in both testaments books. In one sense, that's valid because the Bible is a library of many documents. But none of those documents is what we would call book-length. There are quite a few that are only one to ten pages in length.

Today we'll look at the official list of the books that are in the Bible. That list is called the canon. It comes from the Greek *kanon*– which means reed or measuring stick. The cannons of Fort Sumter and USS Constitution, better known as "Old Ironsides," get their name from the sense of the Greek that meant reed – a hollow tube. The sense of measuring stick evolved and the word canon (with one "n") came to indicate the rule or norm of faith and life. The canon is that collection of writings that are recognized as being the most useful, reliable, and meaningful - in short, they're judged as being true teaching, and the community of faith is drawn to them for those reasons.

Here is one reason that we can't understand the New Testament without the Old Testament. Jesus and the apostles speak of scripture. What are they referring to?

The epistle lesson from 2 Timothy says in part, ". . . from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." Let's think about the sacred writings, the scripture that is being referred to here. When this was written, there was no New Testament. The documents of the New Testament were not yet all written - and they hadn't been collected and assembled into a canon yet. This letter is written to a Jew and the scriptures of the Jews at that time were "the law and the prophets" - which are only two of the three major sections of the Old Testament. The entire make-up of the Old Testament wasn't quite settled at this time.

You see, all of the Old Testament wasn't written at the same time. Old stories about God and humans and their interaction had been passed down for many centuries. They began to be written down around the time of King David. But the exodus from Egypt was about three hundred years before King David. The time of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph was hundreds of years earlier than that. These old stories were finally written down and preserved. Their value was immense. They told those Israelite children of God about how God had already cared for them for century after century. The stories told about how their forbearers had both pleased and displeased God - and that was important to know. By about 400 B.C., the first five books of what would eventually be our Old Testament had reached their final form and were recognized as scripture. They were in the canon. This group of writings is known by several names. Pentateuch, the five writings; Torah, which means law or instruction. The Books of Moses. They are the "law" in the phrase, "the law and the prophets."

During the time of the monarchy in Israel and the Babylonian captivity that followed, there were prophets who preached doom and hope, punishment and redemption. The writings of their actions and their sermons are the next group of documents to be collected and recognized as scripture by about 200 B.C. These are the Nebi-im, the prophets. Together, these are the scriptures that Jesus and his disciples knew and read. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets."²

After the capture of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 AD, the Jewish rabbis struggled to understand how the faith would continue without the Temple. In the town of Jamnia, near present day Tel-Aviv, Jewish rabbis met for several decades. Among many other issues, they considered which books were sacred scriptures. They debated about Ecclesiastes because of its negative slant on life, Song of Songs because of its eroticism, Ezekiel because it contradicted the Torah at some points, Proverbs because it has internal contradictions and Esther because it never mentions God. Eventually all of them were accepted. And so, by about 100 A.D. the third section of the Jewish canon was complete. This is the Ketubim, the Writings. There was the Torah, the Nebi-im, and the Ketubim. If you take the first letter of each section, T, N, and K, and add a couple of vowels, you get Tanakh, the name the Jews give their scriptures.

Something else was happening in the previous few hundred years. There was a huge community of Jews living in Alexandria, Egypt, but a great many only spoke and read Greek, the universal language of the Mediterranean. By the third century BC, the Hebrew writings had been translated into Greek. Legend has it that there were 70 translators who worked seventy days to do the translation from Hebrew to Greek and so the Greek version of the Jewish holy writings became known as the seventy, the *Septuagint*. It was read by the Jews in Alexandria who had lost their Hebrew over the years, and by gentiles who were interested in the religion of these strange people who worshipped only one God. We'll come back to the Septuagint in a moment.

The earliest New Testament writings are some of Paul's letters, written in the 50s.³ The first gospel was Mark, written in the early 70s. Matthew and Luke were written in the 80s and John in the 90s. The other books of the New Testament were also written in the last half of the first century except for a few that may have been written as late as 120 A.D.

It may seem a little odd to us, but when you think about it, there were Christians for a long time before there was a complete collection of writings called the New Testament. How long? Well, in 330 AD, Eusebius, a Christian bishop and historian, wrote that there was common agreement about 21 books that were Christian scripture. There was not yet full acceptance of James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John, and Revelation. The first list

of the twenty-seven books that we call the New Testament was in a letter written by Bishop Athanasius in 367. But even after that, some Christian lists didn't include the exact same 27 writings. The book of Revelation was the last book to be universally recognized. In Eastern Orthodoxy Revelation wasn't accepted until the 700s.

But, the issue of the New Testament canon came up again later on. During the Reformation, in the 1500s, Martin Luther rejected books that he felt were unworthy of Christ – Esther, James, and Revelation. Despite Luther's feelings, the canon remained unchanged. And the question of what writings ought to be in the Bible might come up again. The *Gospel of Thomas* was discovered at Nag Hammadi in Egypt in the 1940s. It is a "sayings gospel" – that is, it's a collection of the sayings of Jesus, but there's no story line, no narrative. To many scholars it appears to be older than any of the four gospels and it is thought that being older, the sayings are closer to the original words of Jesus. So, should it be added to the canon?

Like the Dead Sea Scrolls and the writings found at Nag Hammadi, what if archeologists were to discover letters that we know that Paul wrote - but have been lost? In 1 Corinthians 5:9 Paul mentions a previous letter to the Corinthians.⁴ In Colossians 4:16 Paul speaks of a letter to the Laodiceans.⁵ If these were discovered, should they be added to the canon? These are certainly interesting questions that might come up. But for about 1700 years, the canon of the New Testament has been the one that we have today.

I said that we would return to the Septuagint. Here is its contents. Until around 1500, that was basically the Old Testament of the Christian Church. However, the rabbis in Jamnia were concerned with the Hebrew Scriptures – and not with a Greek translation of the Hebrew writings. By 100 A.D. a Hebrew canon was settled - the shorter list as seen here. At the time of the Reformation in the 1500s, the Protestants adopted the Hebrew list as the Old Testament. They kept the order of the books from the Greek Septuagint, but approved only the books that the Hebrew rabbis had approved. The Roman Catholic Church was furious about this and in 1546 the Council of Trent declared the New Testament and the Old Testament from the Septuagint to be holy scripture, and anyone who disagreed to be anathema.

The books that were in the Septuagint but not in the Hebrew scriptures came to be known as Apocrypha. In Protestant Bibles in English, they weren't considered to be scripture, but they were included as a sort of appendix, located between the Old and New Testaments. However, the Puritans decided that the books of the Apocrypha had to be removed and many English translations do not include them today.

Why is all of this important? Because if we don't know the history of the Bible, we can make some wrong assumptions. There isn't one Bible, there are at least four: Protestant, Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and Slavonic. They have a lot in common, but they also have differences. None of them were handed to us from heaven, complete and bound in black leather. Instead, the contents were written by people over centuries and the decisions about which texts would become our Bible were made over several centuries. Those decisions were made by deeply faithful people, who prayerfully sought to collect those texts that had proven useful over time. When we read these texts with an open heart, when we let the Holy Spirit be with us as we read, when we think about when the texts were written and in what circumstances, then we can more fully meet God in the scriptures, and hear God's message more clearly.

When we raise our children, we don't present them with a manual of 537 rules for good behavior and send them out to obey the rules. Life is a little too complex for that. It's okay to whoop and holler at the football game, when playing at the swimming pool, and when laughing at a friend's joke. But it isn't acceptable during the national anthem, at the dinner table if they see china and crystal and daddy's boss, or when mom has a headache. The problem is, you can't make enough rules to cover every situation. So we don't make a rule book and turn our kids loose. Instead, we try to have a relationship with them, telling them and showing them how to live, teaching them to think, and instilling a caring and thoughtful heart in them so that they can wisely meet life as it unfolds. Well, that's what God has done with us. In scripture we can come to have a relationship with God, not just a rule book. Amen.

¹ George Santayana, *The Life of Reason, Volume 1, 1905*

²The Law and the Prophets – Matt 5:17; 7:12; 11:13; 16:16; 22:40

³The letters attributed to Paul are arranged by length, from longest to shortest.

⁴NLT **1 Corinthians 5:9** When I wrote to you before, I told you not to associate with people who indulge in sexual sin.

⁵NLT **Colossians 4:16** After you have read this letter, pass it on to the church at Laodicea so they can read it, too. And you should read the letter I wrote to them.