



What is the Bible and how to study it? in 80 minutes and 2 sides of A4

The word Bible comes unsurprisingly from the Greek word 'biblia' which simply means books. But even here the detail is important – it is the plural books, rather than the singular book. In the Bible is a library of books by very different authors in very different situations and with very different intentions. Part of bible study is understanding who those authors were, and what were their intentions and contexts. Christians commonly refer to the Bible as the Old and New Testament (or Covenants) and that is a convenient shorthand. However some see that as unkind to Jews, and so the terms Hebrew and Christian Scriptures are often preferred.

Inspiration

For Christians (and indeed for Muslims, and for the Hebrew Scriptures the Jews) the Bible is not like any other collection of books. Often we refer to it in liturgy as the 'Word of God'. Or we will say it is 'inspired' (literally meaning God-breathed – as in 2 Tim 3:16 – but note here that the writer is referring to the Hebrew Scriptures – the church at this point did not have a settled canon of 'New Testament' Scripture). For some Christians (fundamentalists) that means bible study is simply an exercise in comprehension and application – how can I understand this and how can I apply it to my life? They would believe that every word of the bible is literally true. That doesn't mean that they don't produce scholarly works – there is much to be done simply in understanding the text of the bible. However most Christians would see this view as untenable in the light of scientific discoveries and textual criticism. At the other extreme are those who would treat the bible like any other piece of literature. Again few Christians would find themselves at this extreme. After all if the bible is just another book, then why should we take more notice of its contents than any others. So most Christians find themselves somewhere in between. They admit that the bible is not 100% true in every detail, but also think that it is or can be the way in which God speaks to us – ie as the Word of God – and therefore has unique significance and indeed authority for the Christian. Whilst critical study might well allow us to find out more about how the Bible came to be the set of books that it is, so most Christians would agree that God worked through that process of writing, editing, collecting and canonising that give us the Bible – but would also admit that those writers, editors, collectors, and canonisers were human being working with the Holy Spirit, but still fallible.

What books are in the Bible and who decided?

In Protestant bibles there are 66 books altogether – 39 in the Hebrew Scriptures and 27 in the Christian Scriptures. Most other churches including the Roman Catholic and most of the orthodox churches add the 'Apocryphal' books of the Old Testament, though sometimes referring to them as deuterocanonical. The list of these varies somewhat. The traditional view is that these were books written in Greek after the last of the prophets and including into the Scriptures when they were translated into Greek. This Greek work (the Septuagint) was very widely used as the 'Jewish' bible around the time of Jesus, because far more people spoke and wrote Greek than Hebrew. When the New Testament writers – writing in Greek – wanted to quote from the Hebrew Scriptures, this would obviously be a natural source to use for quotations. However we only have varied manuscripts of this from 4th century, and some maintain that Christians added these works. There are some – though fewer and more obscure – variations in the New Testament canon. Luther tried to take various books out of the Bible, but unsuccessfully – Lutherans today study the same Bible as us.

The canon (or rule) of the Bible is the subject of much study itself. Various informal lists of books were drawn up at various points in the Jewish and Christian faith – and these gradually became codified and authorised. However very often core texts – such as the five books of the Mosaic Law or the Four Gospels were undisputed well before the final outcome of these debates. A rough guide is that Jews agreed on the five books of the Law around 400BC, the Prophets around 200BC, with the final list being drawn up at the so called (and now much disputed) Synod of Jamnia around 100AD. Apart from the Apocryphal books Christians have largely agreed with Jews on the books of the Hebrew Scriptures. The final list of New Testament books was agreed around 400AD.

In both sections of the Bible, books are usually grouped together by type (genre) and then often by length – rather than chronologically. In the Hebrew Scriptures we have:

The Law of Moses: Genesis – Deuteronomy (though this contains much pre-history and history as well as law)

The Histories: Joshua – Esther (some of these provide two, sometimes contrasting accounts, of the same history)

Wisdom: Job – Song of Songs

Prophecy – Isaiah – Malachi (divided into four major and 12 minor prophets)

Christian Scriptures begin with: Four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John

Letters: Romans to Jude – many written by Paul

Revelation – Revelation like the second part of Daniel is known as 'apocalyptic' – very popular at the time, though little made it into the Scriptures

What language were they written in?

The Hebrew Scriptures were written in Hebrew (!) and the Christian Scriptures in Greek (koine Greek – a popular form of the language, rather different from the high Greek style of earlier Greek literature). Some sections were in Aramaic.

What manuscripts do we have?

There are vast numbers (compared to other ancient literature) numbers of biblical manuscripts – mostly fragmentary. Textual variants are present – though due to the importance of the material copyists were surprisingly accurate. Scholars often play up or down textual variations, often to further their own viewpoints.

The oldest Christian fragments date from about 125AD, though most are from 2nd and 3rd century sources.

The oldest surviving Hebrew Scriptures were until recently mainly from the 10th and 11th centuries, though the Dead Sea Scrolls have now filled some of the gap. Before that scholars were often forced to choose between these texts or earlier translations (often translations made by

Christians rather than Jews). Manuscripts are still turning up today – many are hidden away, for instance in monasteries, in areas which are currently likely to be looted by bounty hunters or destroyed by Islamic extremists.

Who wrote them?

Most books of the Bible – though not all – have a name associated with them. Critical scholars have often challenged these attributions. This should not just be seen as an attempt to undermine. In biblical times pseudopigraphy was very common – this meant giving the name of great person to add authority to your book. This might range from a book as solid as Romans, where the actual writer admits in the course of the letter that he is not Paul (though it may just be that Paul was dictating to a secretary at this point) to books such as Enoch, where the attribution is to someone who has died centuries previously. How such concerns effect the ‘inspiration’ of the Scriptures is much debated.

Commonly discussed are the Gospel writers (John’s gospel is often referred to as the ‘Fourth gospel’ by those unwillingly to admit its Johanne authorship – though it may just be we have the wrong John!), the deutero-Pauline letters (ie those letters not actually written by Paul, but attributed to him), and in the Hebrew Scriptures the division of Isaiah into three parts. Also the Mosaic authorship of the books of Moses has been much criticised.

What about sources?

In a world where people did not really worry about plagiarism or copyright, and where pseudopigraphy was common, authors commonly put material together from various sources to make a book. Therefore there is a blurred line between what we might call authors and editors (redactors in biblical criticism speak). Sometimes we have those sources sometimes we do not. Some scholars attempt with mixed success to put back together sources that have been lost. For instance Matthew and Luke have passages that agree word for word with each other, but are absent from Mark (Mark is often thought to be a primary source for Matthew and Luke) – therefore we can – debatably – put together a source (Q) that Matthew and Luke shared but is now lost. The other famous piece of source criticism is the division of the five book of Moses into four sources. Along with redaction and source criticism goes ‘form’ criticism – this hopes to go even further than the sources and try to discover something of the contexts in which texts found their original ‘form’ – for instance is Paul sometimes (for instance Phil 2) quoting Christian hymns created by congregations for their early liturgies? Some scholars even therefore try to guess at an ‘oral’ tradition behind the written sources. This is sometimes speculative, but one should understand that when a scroll cost as much as a car, things were often transmitted orally before being committed to ‘paper’. One good example of this is that Jesus must have spoken Aramaic, but his sayings are written down in the Gospels mainly in Greek – so it is valid to search for ‘semiticisms’ behind the Greek text.

When was it written?

This is as much debated as who wrote it, and often for the same reasons: the distance of a writer from the actual events is generally seen as a guide to their accuracy (at least in the ancient world).

The Christian Scriptures were written from about 51AD (I Thessalonians) to the Johannine writings at the end of century. However a good example of the endless debates is that some even put John as the first gospel to be written.

The Hebrew Scriptures were put together over a far longer period of time – perhaps 1500 years. Indeed debates of any accuracy are pointless because the history of these books clearly extends back so far. One settled period is in the time of the Kings, when their does seem to have been an attempt to collect histories and books together for the royal court. However a more important period is after the exile (end of sixth century BC) when Jews made a conscious attempt to give their religion a literary basis – a basis that would then be carried into further diasporas. Again there is a blurred line between collecting, editing and writing at this point. However this was then settled enough that by the time of Jesus no new (canonical) writing had emerged for over 300 years – this might well have fuelled Messianic expectation (‘why have the prophets been silent for so long?’).

Questions to ask?

Not everyone can learn to read Greek and Hebrew, though user friendly commentaries often point out where the finer points of language are lost in translation. Other questions we might ask of a text are:

- Who wrote it and when?
- Did they have an audience in mind?
- Are they writing according to the conventions of a particular genre? What sort of a book is it?
- Did they have a particular view point that they were trying to get across (sometimes, such as Revelation, almost in code to protect them from persecution) or questions they were trying to answer (Paul may well often be writing in response to specific queries)?
- What does the passage say to us today, and how might we apply it?
- Does it fit in with wider biblical themes?

More reading

There is everything to be gained from having a decent bible commentary. Some are in one volume (eg Oxford) but many just refer to one or two books. Slightly older but cheap and accessible are the Penguin series. Also there are vast resources available on line. However beware -many of these are written with a particular axe to grind. Whilst this is also true of published books, remember these have at least been through readers and editors – anyone can put anything on line. There is the Tom Wright industry (former Bishop of Durham, a great new testament scholar, massively prolific and popular writer) – though even Tom has his (considerable) axes to grind. One clue is that Tom writes as ‘Tom Wright’ for the consumer in the pew, and ‘N T Wright’ for the scholar in the University. A book I have found useful as an introduction with lots of pictures is Nick Page’s ‘The Bible Book: A User’s Guide.’