

## BIBLE

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The New Testament was written over a period of about 100 years. The original language in which it was written was Greek. This portion of the Bible tells of Christ's coming, His life and ministry, and the growth of the early church.

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The old covenant is the covenant sealed at Mount Sinai in the days of Moses. By this covenant, the living and true God, who had delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, promised to bless them as His special people. They were also to worship Him alone as their God and to accept His law as their rule for life (Ex 19:3-6; 24:3-8).

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In the form in which it has been handed down among the Jewish people, the Old Testament, or Hebrew Bible, contains three divisions: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. The Law consists of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy; this section of the Old Testament is also known as the PENTATEUCH. The Prophets fall into two subdivisions: the former prophets (Joshua, Judges, First and Second Samuel, and First and Second Kings) and the latter prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Book of the Twelve Prophets-Hosea through Malachi). The rest of the books are gathered together in the Writings: Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah (counted as one book), and First and Second Chronicles.

The arrangement of the Old Testament with which readers today are most familiar has been inherited from the pre-Christian Greek translation of the Old Testament (the SEPTUAGINT) - an arrangement which was also followed by the later Latin Bible (the Vulgate). This arrangement has four divisions: the Pentateuch, the historical books, poetry, and prophecy.

The New Testament opens with five narrative books-the four gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. The gospels deal with the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The Book of Acts continues the story of the development of the early church across the next 30 years. Acts serves as a sequel to the gospels in general; originally it was written as a sequel to the Gospel of Luke in particular.

Twenty-one letters, or epistles, follow the historical narratives. Thirteen of these letters bear the name of the apostle Paul as writer, while the remaining eight are the work of other apostles or of authors associated with apostles. The last book in the New Testament, the Revelation of John, portrays through visions and symbolic language the accomplishment of God's purpose in the world and the ultimate triumph of Christ.

**Authority of the Bible.** The authority of the Bible is implied by its title, "the Word of God." It is the written record of the Word of God which came to prophets, apostles, and other spokesmen, and which "became flesh" in Jesus Christ. Christians believe Jesus Christ was the Word of God in a unique sense. Through Jesus, God communicated the perfect revelation of Himself to mankind. For Christians the authority of the Bible is related to the authority of Christ. The Old Testament was the Bible that Jesus used-the authority to which He made constant appeal and whose teachings He accepted and followed. When Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane and led away to His execution, He submitted with the words, "The Scriptures must be fulfilled" (Mark 14:49). He saw His mission in the world as a fulfillment of the predictions of the Old Testament.

The New Testament presents the record of Jesus' life, teachings, death, and resurrection; a narrative of the beginning of the Christian church with the coming of the Holy Spirit; and the story of the extension of the gospel and the planting of the church during the following generation. It also contains the written teachings of Jesus' apostles and other early Christians who applied the principles of His teaching and redemptive work to their lives.

**Revelation and Response.** According to the Bible, God has made Himself known in a variety of ways. "The heavens declare the glory of God" (Ps 19:1). "For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead" (Rom 1:20). But while God is revealed in His creation and through the inner voice of man's conscience, the primary means by which He has made Himself known is through the Bible.

God has revealed Himself through His mighty acts and in the words of His messengers, or spokesmen. Either of these ways is incomplete without the other. In the Old Testament record, none of the mighty acts of God is emphasized more than the EXODUS - God's deliverance of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage. As He delivered His people, God repeatedly identified Himself as their redeemer God: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before Me" (Ex 20:2-3).

If they had been delivered with no explanation, the nation of Israel would have learned little about the God who redeemed His people. The Israelites might have guessed that in such events as the plagues of Egypt and the parting of the waters of the Red Sea, some supernatural power was at work on their behalf. But they would not have known the nature of this power or God's purpose for them as a people.

God also communicated with His people, the nation of Israel, through Moses, to whom He had already made Himself known in the vision of the burning bush. God instructed Moses to tell his fellow Israelites what had been revealed to him. This was no impersonal force at work, but the God of their ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In fulfillment of His promises to them, God was acting now on behalf of their descendants.

In communicating with His people, God revealed both His identity and His purpose. His purpose was to make the Israelites a nation dedicated to His service alone. This message, conveyed to the Israelites through Moses, would have been ineffective if God had not delivered them personally. On the other hand, His deliverance would have been meaningless without the message. Together both constituted the Word of God to the Israelites—the saving message of the God who both speaks and acts.

This pattern of God's mighty acts and the prophetic word interacting with each other continues throughout the course of biblical history. The Babylonian CAPTIVITY is a good example of this process. A succession of prophets warned the people that if they did not mend their ways, Captivity would come on them as judgment. But even during the years of the Captivity the prophets continued to speak, encouraging the captives and promising that God would deliver them from their plight.

The prophets were God's primary spokesmen to the people of Israel in Old Testament times. But they were not His only messengers. Priests and sages, or wise men, were other agents through whom God's will was made known. The teachings of many of these messengers are preserved in the Bible.

In addition to God's revelation of Himself through the Bible, God's Word also records the response of those to whom the revelation was given. Too often the response was unbelief and disobedience. But at other times, people responded in faith and obedience. The Psalms, especially, proclaim the grateful response of men and women who experienced the grace and righteousness of God. These faithful people sometimes voiced their appreciation in words addressed directly to God. At other times they reported to others what God had come to mean to them.

In the New Testament writings, revelation and response came together in the person of Jesus Christ. On the one hand, Jesus was God's perfect revelation of Himself—He was the divine Word in human form. His works of mercy and power portrayed God in action, especially His supreme act of sacrifice to bring about "the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom 3:24). His teaching expressed the mind of God.

The words and acts of Jesus also proclaimed the meaning and purpose of His works. For example, His act of casting out demons "with the finger of God" (Luke 11:20) was a token that the kingdom of God had come upon them. He also declared that His death, which he interpreted as the fulfillment of prophetic Scripture (Mark 14:49), was "a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

In his life and ministry, Jesus also illustrated the perfect human response of faith and obedience to God. Jesus was "the Apostle [God's Messenger to us] and High Priest [our Representative with God] of our confession" (Heb 3:1). Thus, Jesus performed the mighty acts of God and He spoke authoritatively as God's Messenger and Prophet.

Preservation of the Bible. The Bible is a written, authoritative record by which any teaching or theory may be judged. But behind the writing lay periods of time when these messages were circulated in spoken form. The stories of the patriarchs were passed from generation to generation by word of mouth before they were written. The messages of the prophets were delivered orally before they were fixed in writing. Narratives of the life and ministry of Christ were repeated orally for two or

three decades before they were given literary form. But the Bible owes its preservation to the fact that all these oral narratives were eventually reduced to writing. Just as God originally inspired the Bible, He has used this means to preserve His Word for future generations.

The first person in the Bible to write anything down was Moses. God instructed Moses to write as a permanent memorial the divine vow that the name of Amalek would be blotted out (Ex 17:14). From that time until the end of the New Testament age, the writing of the many books and parts of the Bible continued.

None of the original biblical documents-referred to by scholars as the "original autographs"-has survived. No scrap of parchment or papyrus bearing the handwriting of any of the biblical authors has been discovered. But before the original documents disappeared, they were copied. These copies of the original writings are the texts on which current translations of the Bible are based.

The process of copying and recopying the Bible has continued to our time. Until the middle of the 15th century A.D., all the copying was done by hand. Then, with the invention of printing in Europe, copies could be made in greater quantities by using this new process. Each copy of the Bible had to be produced slowly by hand with the old system, but now the printing press could produce thousands of copies in a short time. This made the Scriptures available to many people, rather than just the few who could afford handmade copies.

The older handwritten copies of Bible texts are called manuscripts. Early manuscripts for the books of the Bible were written on papyrus or skin. Papyrus was a type of ancient paper manufactured from a reed plant that grew in the Nile Valley and similar environments. Papyrus was inexpensive, but it was not very durable. It rotted quickly when exposed to dampness.

The ancient papyrus manuscripts which have been discovered were found in the dry sands of Egypt and other arid places. Great quantities of inscribed papyri have been recovered from the Egyptian sands during the last hundred years dating from the period shortly before and after the beginning of the Christian era, about A.D. 30. A few scraps of papyri containing ancient texts of the Bible have been among the recovered manuscripts.

The skins of animals proved to be a much more durable writing material than papyrus. Many different writing materials were manufactured from such skins. Some were a coarse form of leather. Others were subjected to a special refining process, emerging as a writing material known as parchment. Vellum, another valued writing material, was made from calfskin. Some of the most important manuscripts of the Bible were written on vellum.

The Canon of the Bible. The word canon means a "rod"-specifically, a rod with graduated marks used for measuring length. This word refers to the list of individual books that were eventually judged as authoritative and included as a part of the Old Testament and the New Testament.

The early formation of the canon of the Old Testament is not easy to trace. Its threefold division in its early history-the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings-may reflect the three stages of its formation. From the beginning, the Law was accepted, even if it was not always obeyed. Evidence of its acceptance would include Moses' reading of "the Book of the Covenant" to the people at Mount Sinai and the people's response, "All that the Lord has said we will do, and be obedient" (Ex 24:7).

Further evidence of acceptance of the Law includes the discovery of the "Book of the Law," probably the Book of Deuteronomy, in the Temple of Jerusalem during King Josiah's reign and the religious reform which followed (2 Kings 22:8-23:25). Also, following the return of the Jewish people from the

Babylonian Captivity, "the Book of the Law of Moses" was read to the people of Jerusalem under Ezra's direction. This book became the constitution of their new nation (Neh 8).

The second division of the Old Testament accepted by the Jewish people was the Prophets. The prophets' words were preserved from the beginning by their disciples, or by others who recognized the prophets as messengers of God. In general, their words were probably written shortly after they were spoken, for their authority as God's messengers came before their widespread acceptance by the Jewish people. The words of the prophets were not regarded as authoritative because they were included in the Old Testament; they were included because they were considered to be authoritative.

The third division of the Hebrew Old Testament, the Writings, may have remained "open" longer than the first two. Scholars know less about the formation of this division than the first two.

The "Bible" which Jesus used was the Hebrew Old Testament. He left no instructions about forming a new collection of authoritative writings to stand beside the books which He and His disciples accepted as God's Word. The Old Testament was also the Bible of the early church, but it was the Old Testament as fulfilled by Jesus. Early Christians interpreted the Old Testament in the light of His person and work. This new perspective controlled the early church's interpretation to such a degree that, while Jews and Christians shared the same Bible, they understood it so differently that they might almost have been using two different Bibles.

The works and words of Jesus were first communicated in spoken form. The apostles and their associates proclaimed the gospel by word of mouth. Paul taught the believers orally in the churches which he founded when he was present. But when he was absent, he communicated through his letters.

Quite early in its history, the church felt a need for a written account of the teachings of Jesus. His teachings did provide the basis for the new Christian way of life. But the church grew so large that many converts were unable to rely on the instructions of those who had heard and memorized the teachings of Jesus. From about A.D. 50 onward, probably more than one written collection of sayings of Jesus circulated in the churches. The earliest written gospel appears to have been the Gospel of Mark, written about A.D. 64.

An individual gospel, a letter from an apostle, or even several works circulating independently, would not amount to a canon, or an authoritative list of books. A canon implies a collection of writings. There is evidence that two collections of Christian writings circulated among the churches at the beginning of the second century. One of these was the gospel collection—the four writings which are commonly called the four gospels. The other collection was the Pauline collection, or the letters of the apostle Paul. The anonymous letter to the Hebrews was added to this second collection at an early date.

Early Christians continued to accept the Old Testament as authoritative. But they could interpret the Old Testament in the light of Jesus' deeds and words only if they had a reliable record of them. So, alongside Moses and the prophets, they had these early writings about Jesus and letters from the apostles, who had known Jesus in the flesh.

When officials of the early church sought to make a list of books about Jesus and the early church which they considered authoritative, they retained the Old Testament, on the authority of Jesus and His apostles. Along with these books they recognized as authoritative the writings of the new age—four gospels, or biographies on the life and ministry of Jesus; the 13 letters of Paul; and letters of

other apostles and their companions. The gospel collection and the apostolic collection were joined together by the Book of Acts, which served as a sequel to the gospel story, as well as a narrative background for the earlier epistles.

The primary standard applied to a book was that it must be written either by an apostle or by someone close to the apostles. This guaranteed that their writing about Jesus and the early church would have the authenticity of an eyewitness account. As in the earliest phase of the church's existence, "the apostles' doctrine" (Acts 2:42) was the basis of its life and thought. The apostolic writings formed the charter, or foundation documents, of the church.

None of the books written after the death of the apostles were included in the New Testament, although early church officials recognized they did have some value as inspirational documents. The fact that they were written later ruled them out for consideration among the church's foundation documents. These other writings might be suitable for reading aloud in church because of their edifying character, but only the apostolic writings carried ultimate authority. They alone could be used as the basis of the church's belief and practice.

Behind the Bible is a thrilling story of how God revealed Himself and His will to human spokesmen and then acted throughout history to preserve His Word and pass it along to future generations. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever" (Isa 40:8).

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