

## **INTRODUCTION TO some themes in CHRISTIANITY**

### **The library commonly called the Bible**

#### **1. What is the Bible?**

Greek meaning “the books”.

Total of 66 books agreed by all Christians.

Precise composition “canonicity” (deciding the definitive collection) develops in first two centuries after Jesus; finally declared at end of 4<sup>th</sup> century.

Some remaining disagreement over Apocrypha (hidden things); more accepted by Orthodox and Catholics than Protestants, e.g. Tobit, Judith, Maccabees (largely “inter-testamental” [between the two testaments])

The principal source to the testimony of God’s dealings with humanity, with the Hebrew people; and to Jesus as the ultimate authority for Christianity.

#### **2. How is it viewed?**

a. As the inerrant norm of faith.

- Protected from error by God as the source of teaching on Jesus and the Christian faith. Inspired by the Spirit of God and therefore definitive.
- John Calvin (1509-1564) saw the Bible as the sole norm of faith, therefore sought a biblical mandate for all doctrines; if it was not mandated by scripture then it could not be held to be a core element of belief.
- Martin Luther (1483-1546) saw the Bible as the sole norm of faith but practices could be accepted if they were not contradicted by scripture.
- Catholics see the Bible plus the on-going Tradition of the Christian Church as defining faith, e.g. the great Ecumenical Councils. Therefore Church as the authentic guarantor of the interpretation of scripture.
- Bible does not systematically develop doctrine, e.g. incarnation and trinity, therefore open to a wide range of interpretation of most things, therefore “scripture alone” tends to lead to fragmentation of Christian churches based on various weights given to different interpretations.
- Core beliefs held by all:
  - Love of God manifested in Jesus
  - Jesus comes to save humanity
  - Jesus dies and rises to eternal life to open the way for eternal life for humankind
- God speaks through the Bible therefore there can be no errors in it
  - All historical events must have happened as reported
  - Teachings of New Testament must be accepted as divine law
  - Bible contains the Word of God therefore to criticise it is to criticise God.

b. As witness to revelation

- Does not hold strict and total inerrancy of texts, e.g. creation stories are not scientific accounts but myths (accounts generated by human authors in their time to convey their understanding as best they could).
- Stress on “spiritual truth” contained in Bible rather than factual accounts, therefore scripture is infallible in regard to all that God wills to teach as necessary to salvation (Roman Catholic and mainline Protestants).
- Not dictated or sent down by God but the work of human authors inspired by God so that *taken as a whole* it contains spiritual truth.
- Jesus did not write or dictate to scribes or memorisers, he taught in parables and not systematic doctrine, therefore Christian faith not a set of doctrines or propositions, rather the self-disclosure of God in Jesus, therefore open to expanding knowledge and understanding.
- Bible is trustworthy witness to what God did and revealed in Jesus but not inerrant in details, e.g. Jesus died, rose to eternal life and appeared to disciples but there is disparity over who got to the tomb first and what they saw.

c. As witness of revelatory experience

- There is no reason to expect that the Bible should be any more infallible than any other document of antiquity, therefore it could contain errors of fact, e.g. the supposed exorcism of demons, and of moral perception, e.g. women to be obedient to men.
- Bible writers were limited by the culture of their day; therefore they see things, including Jesus, according to their own light.
- Gospel stories could be the reflections of later generations of Christians “read back” onto Jesus.
- The key is the experience of Jesus as liberator to new life in the resurrection, and the texts are there to evoke and sustain that experience.
- Bible is record of that on-going experience.
- “Liberal Protestants” e.g. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834).

### 3. How do Christians interpret the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament?

a. Approaches

- By allegory, i.e. parts of the story stand for something else, e.g. the Song of Songs is an erotic love poem so was interpreted by allegory to be about Jesus’ love for the Church
- By typology, i.e. looking for models in the Old Testament that are fulfilled in the New, e.g. the sacrifice of Isaac and the sacrifice of Jesus
- Post-Descartes (1596-1650), scientific methods of interpretation to apply rational study, which leads to the historical-critical method, which says that all must be open to objective rational investigation and proof, therefore the need to go back historically through layers of meaning in

search of the original, therefore the need for experts. This was marked by a concentration on how texts were put together and transmitted, and the precise meaning of obscure Hebrew words.

- Later in 20<sup>th</sup> century the rise of literary critical methods, which give rise to a variety of meanings in reading the text, therefore the premise that texts may have layers of meaning unknown to the author. This tends towards a situation in which everyone can give their own reading of a text without any “experts” to be definitive and thus leads to an emphasis on things like “what this text says to me” as narrative, rhetoric, story etc.

b. Uses to which the Bible has been put.

- A verse-by-verse ready reference for any query
- “Proof texts” to support Christian doctrine
- To address pastoral/practical situations, therefore applied theology, therefore the need to see the authors as theologians addressing a particular situation.

#### **4. Authorship of Hebrew Bible**

a. Prominent misunderstandings

- The whole thing was planned out in advance
- The authors knew that they were contributing to “sacred scripture” that would be read by millions of people, thousands of years later
- These are written works to be read; rather they are works to be spoken and heard, therefore a different genre
- The Old Testament authors were always looking forward to the day when the New Testament would appear as though it was the awaited sequel
- That the books of the Bible were written in sequence.

b. Closer to the truth

- The biblical sequence is not chronological
- The period of authorship covers about 700 years
- Books often incorporate much earlier material that has circulated in an oral tradition
- Books often have joint authorship under a single named author
- Books are often composite, having been re-edited at a later date and with new material added in at a later date.

#### **5. The historical-critical method**

- **Source criticism:** what were the major sources from which the authors drew, e.g. which earlier gospels were used as a source to write the later ones.

- **Form** criticism: look for portions of text that have something in common, classify them, then compare to see what light they throw on context, milieu of authors, process of composition, e.g. collect together parables or miracle stories, look for origins and how transmitted.
- **Redaction** criticism: how was the document re-worked over time and why did the redactors do it this way, e.g. why did the “final redactor” put the gospel together in this way; what were the issues in society and how did they differ from those of other gospels.

## 6. The Bible inspired?

- Not dictation or a literal, verbal revelation for modern Western Christians
- Somehow “God is behind it”
- The power of God in it changes lives
- It has a universal significance
- Contains more than the author thought
- Speaks to the heart; is “affirmed in the heart by the spirit of God”

## 7. Example of source critical methods

### a. Starting questions:

- How do you suspect that a document might be composite?
- How do you separate it out?

### b. Pointers to look for:

- Differences in style
- Differences in emphasis
- Inconsistencies and contradictions
- Clumsy attempts to harmonise different texts

### c. Example: Pentateuch/Torah

- Pentateuch (Greek “Five Books”) or Torah: the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy.
- Four principal authors have been identified:
- **J** = The Jahwist, uses the name Yahweh for God, 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE, stresses intimacy between God and human beings, e.g. Gen. 2:16f, 3:8ff, 11:5
- **E** = The Elohist, uses the name Elohim for God, 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE, more distance between God and human beings, e.g. God speaks through dreams and angels not direct, e.g. Gen. 20:3, 28:12, 40:5ff, 32:1
- **D** = The Deuteronomist, late seventh/early sixth century BCE, focus on God and Israel, e.g. most of Deuteronomy
- **P** = The Priestly tradition, 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, specialises in details, instructions and lists, e.g. most of Leviticus and Numbers.

## Genesis Ch. 35 as an example

God said to Jacob, 'Arise, go up to Bethel, and settle there. Make an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau.' <sup>2</sup>So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, 'Put away the foreign gods that are among you, and purify yourselves, and change your clothes; <sup>3</sup>then come, let us go up to Bethel, that I may make an altar there to the God who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone.' <sup>4</sup>So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods that they had, and the rings that were in their ears; and Jacob hid them under the oak that was near Shechem.

<sup>5</sup> As they journeyed, a terror from God fell upon the cities all around them, so that no one pursued them. <sup>6</sup>Jacob came to Luz (that is, Bethel), which is in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him, <sup>7</sup>and there he built an altar and called the place El-bethel,\* because it was there that God had revealed himself to him when he fled from his brother. <sup>8</sup>And Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died, and she was buried under an oak below Bethel. So it was called Allon-bacuth.\*

<sup>9</sup> God appeared to Jacob again when he came from Paddan-aram, and he blessed him. <sup>10</sup> God said to him, 'Your name is Jacob; no longer shall you be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name.' So he was called Israel. <sup>11</sup> God said to him, 'I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall spring from you. <sup>12</sup>The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you.' <sup>13</sup>Then God went up from him at the place where he had spoken with him. <sup>14</sup>Jacob set up a pillar in the place where he had spoken with him, a pillar of stone; and he poured out a drink-offering on it, and poured oil on it. <sup>15</sup>So Jacob called the place where God had spoken with him Bethel.

<sup>16</sup> Then they journeyed from Bethel; and when they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel was in childbirth, and she had a difficult labour. <sup>17</sup>When she was in her difficult labour, the midwife said to her, 'Do not be afraid; for now you will have another son.' <sup>18</sup>As her soul was departing (for she died), she named him Ben-oni;\* but his father called him Benjamin. <sup>19</sup>So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem), <sup>20</sup>and Jacob set up a pillar at her grave; it is the pillar of Rachel's tomb, which is there to this day. <sup>21</sup>Israel journeyed on, and pitched his tent beyond the tower of Eder.

<sup>22</sup> While Israel lived in that land, Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his father's concubine; and Israel heard of it. Now the sons of Jacob were twelve. <sup>23</sup> The sons of Leah: Reuben (Jacob's firstborn), Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun. <sup>24</sup> The sons of Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin. <sup>25</sup> The sons of Bilhah, Rachel's maid: Dan and Naphtali. <sup>26</sup> The sons of Zilpah, Leah's maid: Gad and Asher. These were the sons of Jacob who were born to him in Paddan-aram.

<sup>27</sup> Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre, or Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron), where Abraham and Isaac had resided as aliens. <sup>28</sup> Now the days of Isaac were one hundred and eighty years. <sup>29</sup> And Isaac breathed his last; he died and was gathered to his people, old and full of days; and his sons Esau and Jacob buried him.

v.1-4 = E, v. 5 = P, v. 6-8 = E, v. 9-13 = P, v. 14 = J, v. 15 = P, v. 16-22a = J,

v. 22b-29 = P

## 8. What books and in what order?

### a. The Hebrew Canon

#### Torah

Genesis  
Exodus  
Leviticus  
Numbers  
Deuteronomy

#### The Prophets

The Former Prophets:  
Joshua  
Judges  
Samuel  
Kings  
The Latter Prophets:  
Isaiah  
Jeremiah  
Ezekiel  
“The Twelve”

#### The Writings

Psalms  
Proverbs  
Job  
Song of Songs  
Ruth  
Lamentations  
Ecclesiastes  
Esther  
Daniel  
Ezra  
Nehemiah  
Chronicles

### b. The Greek Canon (255-132 BCE)

#### Law Books

Genesis  
Exodus  
Leviticus  
Numbers  
Deuteronomy

#### History Books

Joshua  
Judges  
Ruth  
1 + 2 Samuel  
1 + 2 Kings  
1 + 2 Chronicles  
Ezra  
Nehemiah  
Esther

#### Poetry and Wisdom Books

Job  
Psalms  
Proverbs  
Ecclesiastes  
Song of Solomon

#### Books of Prophecies

Isaiah  
Jeremiah  
Lamentations  
Ezekiel  
Daniel  
Hosea  
Joel  
Amos  
Obadiah  
Jonah  
Micah  
Nahum  
Habakkuk  
Zephaniah  
Haggai  
Zechariah and Malachi

## 9. Dates

a. When were the lists of which books to include complete?

- Torah/Pentateuch by the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE
- Prophets by about 180 BCE
- Writings between 60 and 90 CE (but works earlier)

b. When were Prophets writing?

- 8<sup>th</sup> century: Amos, Hosea, First Isaiah (Ch 1-39)
- 7<sup>th</sup> century: Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Jeremiah
- 6<sup>th</sup> century (Exile period 587-538) Ezekiel
- 6<sup>th</sup> century (post-Exile 538 and later) Second Isaiah (Ch 40-55), Third Isaiah (Ch 56-66), Haggai, Zechariah, Obadiah, Joel
- 5<sup>th</sup> century: Ezra, Nehemiah
- 4<sup>th</sup> century: Jonah, Ruth, Esther

c. When were the Writings written?

- Post-Exile: Proverbs, Job, 1 + 2 Chronicles

d. What of the Psalms?

Generally seen as the Hymn Book of the Second Temple (c520-c35 BCE). 150 in number. Some definitely written earlier and circulated until collected in Psalms. Some back to time of David (d. c970 BCE)? Wide range of styles:

- Songs of Zion 48, 84
- Royal Psalms 2, 20, 21, 45
- Liturgical 24, 68, 132, 120-134
- Wisdom 1
- Thanksgiving: individual 145, communal 118
- Laments: individual 11, 38, communal 44

## **THE NEW TESTAMENT: 27 Books**

### **10. The earliest writings: Paul's letters**

a. Jesus lived approx. 4 BCE to 30 CE; Paul's active ministry was approx. 34-64 CE. There is no evidence or grounds to think that they met.

b. The authentic letters: scholars are in agreement on seven

- 1 Thessalonians written around 50
- 1 Corinthians, around 54
- Galatians, around 54 (some scholars say earlier 48-49)
- 2 Corinthians, around 55
- Romans, around 56
- Philippians, scholarly dispute: 55-56 or 57-59, or 61-63
- Philemon, around 61-63

c. Two open to scholarly debate about authorship

- 2 Thessalonians, if Paul then around 50, if others then later
- Colossians, if Paul then around 61-63, if others then later

d. From the followers of Paul but attributed to him

- Ephesians
- The Pastoral Epistles: 1 + 2 Timothy and Titus

e. Criteria for deciding authorship:

- Literary style
- Linguistic elements and vocabulary
- Shifts in theology
- Textual evidence, e.g. if missing from early manuscript collections.

f. What are they?

- Paul is writing to specific churches and dealing with their problems as have been relayed to him
- They are public letters in the sense that even though they have an individual main recipient they are always addressed to a community associated with that person but over time they get wider circulation and readership.
- Romans is the closest thing to a worked out theological presentation.

### **11. The Gospels**

a. How did they get to be written?

- Work of human authors in Greek, in particular contexts, audiences, times
- Under the inspiration/guidance of God

- Large pool of oral tradition going the rounds of the early Christian communities. Maybe some earlier written material, e.g. Q (German *Quelle* = source).
- Theological writings aimed to convey the teaching of Jesus with particular emphases, materials etc. Theology often dictates structure.
- Authors feel free to change even the “reported speech” of Jesus for a different context to keep same point clear, e.g. Matthew 7: 24-27 and Luke 6: 47-49. Same story of Jesus but Matthew writes for Palestinian audience, therefore Jesus speaks of house built on rock or sand, but Luke for Greek audience, therefore Jesus speaks of house with foundation or none.

b. Synoptic (Greek = condensed, from the same perspective) gospels

- Mark, oldest, late 60s (probably 64-70 CE). Has Q as a source plus own material.
- Matthew, c.75 CE, uses 90% of Mark plus additional material from Q and own sources
- Luke, 75-100, uses Mark, Matthew, Q plus special sources (also author of Acts of the Apostles, therefore often talk of Luke-Acts).

c. Fourth Gospel, generally called John’s Gospel

- Authorship uncertain, went through different editions, had different authors, therefore talk of the Johannine Community
- Possibly written in Ephesus towards end of 1<sup>st</sup> century

## 12. Other writings

a. Acts of the Apostles

- Accounts of the early Christian communities, probably written by Luke in last quarter of 1<sup>st</sup> century.

b. Letter to the Hebrews

- Author unknown
- Addressed to second generation Greek-speaking Christian Jews

c. Catholic (Greek = universal) Epistles (Latin = letter to a wide audience)

- Written to the Christian Church at large as opposed to a particular church as in the case of Paul’s letters
- James, letter from the leader of the Jerusalem Church, called “the Brother of the Lord”, to Jewish Christians.
- 1 + 2 Peter: 1<sup>st</sup> Letter of Peter probably written by him, dictated and polished by a scribe, to the Gentile (Gk = “the nations”, i.e. non-Jews) Christians; 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter written later attributed to Peter to invoke his authority against false teachings.

- 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Letters of John; written by the Johannine Community using similar vocabulary and themes, to counter disagreements.
- Jude, written from the Jerusalem Church by Judah, the “brother” of Jesus and James, to correct error.

d. The Book of Revelation

- A book of the literary style of apocalyptic (Gk = unveiling) writings, which aim to give a vision of what is normally hidden, therefore are often associated with notes of “the future” and the End Time (similar literature to Book of Daniel in Old Testament).
- Author unknown but often referred to as “John of Patmos”, a small island of the coast of Turkey.
- Written in the late 1<sup>st</sup> century, 90s?
- Initially addressed to the seven churches of Asia Minor (Turkey), who were under persecution, therefore themes of the victory of good vs. evil and thoughts of the End Time

**13. Canonicity (Who put the NT together and approved it?)**

- The form, structure and composition evolved gradually but were generally there by the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.
- The first list giving all 27 Books was 367 CE.
- Criteria used: origins in the apostolic age (or immediately afterwards), early composition, and wide usage.
- The Church guarantees the Canon; it says “this belongs” or “that doesn’t”. There were many documents that did not make it in; more than did. Collected as Apocryphal Gospels/Writings