

**Introduction:** Christians should be people of "the Book of books." As we come to a new year, it is my hope that all of you will become more of a reader and student of Scripture because the Word of God is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (Psalm 119:105). Without it you and I walk in darkness, get lost, and wander aimlessly.

- I want to begin this morning a series I am calling "A Journey Through the Bible." My aim is to more familiarize you with the larger themes, story, and purpose of Scripture, that as you read this God-inspired anthology, you may benefit from it more.
- We will spend the first few weeks considering several things such as How We Got Our Bible, The Big Picture, and How to Read the Bible. Then I intend for us to look at each book by way of survey and overview, at the pace of about 1 book a week. One of the things that I hope this will encourage is us reading the Bible together as a congregation. For instance, if next week we were to be looking at the book of Esther, that in preparation for the lesson you would read it.
- In particular, I want us to be thinking about the Bible as an Inspired anthology of various literary genres, so that we can better interpret and understand how and what God has revealed to us in this great Book.
- This week I want to begin with **How We Got Our Bible**. This is also going to take us into next week. All of this lesson is a great simplification and overview. Much more could be said, and you could consult much more thorough information in books like F.F. Bruce's The Canon of Scripture and Geisler and Nix A General Introduction to the Bible.

## I. THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES (or Old Testament)

### A. Origins

- I say Hebrew, with realization that there are some small exceptions of Aramaic passages (Daniel)
- Writers – Primarily Moses for first 5 books, known as the Pentateuch or "books of the Law." Some are clearly indicated, such as certain Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and prophets usually named in title. Some are historical compilations, perhaps various authors compiled over time with records.
- It is difficult to know how these were recognized and compiled as Scriptures (remembering there were large amounts of writing being done over the centuries) because of lack of information. There are all kinds of theories, but we don't know for sure.
- What we do know is that by the time of Christ and the Apostles, there is a compiled and recognized body of work that is considered to be the Word of God, the inspired Scripture.
- The books were sometimes arranged, ordered, and grouped differently than we have come to recognize, but the contents are essentially the same. This recognized body of literature stops, according to the testimony of Christ and the Apostles, about 400 years before Jesus' incarnation into the world. There are writings, including histories and commentaries that are widely used and even held to some degree as authoritative by the Jewish people and teachers, but not on par with the 39 books we now know as our Old Testament.

### B. The Apocrypha

- One of the most well know group of writings that are written beginning during the 300 years between the Old and New Testament is the Apocrypha. These are 15 interesting books, but though existing during the time of the New Testament, are not quoted as Scripture. They are never quoted with authority in the NT, though I do think there is an allusion to one in Hebrews 11.

### C. The Dead Sea Scrolls

- In 1947, a Bedouin shepherd boy was looking for a lost sheep in the Northwest region of the Dead Sea. He entered a cave and there found several large clay pots with ancient scrolls in them. Eventually his discover led to further search by scholars and over 800 scrolls and fragments were found in 11 caves dating from 1<sup>st</sup> Century B.C. Because of the climate in the cave, the scrolls were remarkably preserved.
- This is significant because one difficulty in studying the Hebrew Scriptures is that they would destroy old manuscripts when new ones were created. These scrolls had been put into the caves for preservation by men of the Qumran community, a monastic sect of Judaism often thought to have been influential on John the Baptist.
- Until the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, the earliest copies we had were 9<sup>th</sup> Century AD (known as the Massoretic text) which was edited into a fixed form about AD 500.
- With the discovery of these Scrolls, we were able to go back 1,000s of years (!) to 1<sup>st</sup> Century B.C. There are complete or partial fragments from every Hebrew book now in our Bible, plus commentaries, community rules, and other writings.
- One primary value of their discovery is the amazing accuracy in comparison with the copies (by hand) of the 9<sup>th</sup> Century and beyond. While they are not a Xerox copy in exactness, it does show the extreme care and trustworthiness of those who copied them, and God sovereign oversight of the process.

### D. The Septuagint

- The first translation of the Scriptures were from Hebrew to Greek. This took place in Alexandria, Egypt, for the Greek speaking Jews in that area sometime before 200 B.C.

- As the Mediterranean world was "Hellenized" (the spread of the Greek language and culture under Alexander the Great), Greek became the more common language, and for Jews they wanted the Scriptures in the vernacular (common language).

## II. THE GREEK SCRIPTURES (or New Testament)

- The Septuagint became popular in a changing world, even above the Hebrew version. It is this version that is popular during the time of Christ and the Apostles. Many of the quotations of the Old Testament Scriptures in the New Testament read differently, because they are taken from this version.

### A. Origins

- After the earthly ministry of Christ, His followers wrote to communicate His teachings and miracles, and to continue to record the history of God's people now spreading to all the nations. There is also particular instruction as to how local churches are to be organized, seeing that the Old Testament way of worship and national organization was being abolished.
- The writers of the New Testament are several of the 12 Apostles of Jesus (Matthew, John, Peter), Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles, apostolic assistants (Mark, Luke) early church leaders (James and Jude, the brothers of Jesus) or unknown (Hebrews – possibly Paul).
- Primary purpose of spreading the preaching and works of Jesus in His earthly ministry or instruction to local churches and their leaders. Only one "personal" letter from Paul to Philemon.
- The letters to the churches were originally written to be read, and some of them were known as "circulating" letters, to be copied and distributed to other churches. It is thought that though some were not originally circulatory, they became so for the spreading of the teaching of the Apostles and leaders.
- During this early period of the church, the Old Testament continued to be quoted, applied, and remained authoritative for Christians, though some things were recognized to have only a Jewish application under the Old Covenant. Never did they consider themselves to be something totally new, but the result of the fulfillment of the Old Testament.
- The size of the Hebrew Scriptures written on scrolls would take a cart to carry and very expensive, so very few would have their own copies.
- So the church had those Scriptures, and a then growing body of writings by those recognized as leaders in the church.
- Peter refers to Paul's writing as Scripture (2Peter 3:16).
- During and following the time of the Apostles, there were cycles of both Jewish and Roman persecution, and eventually part of that persecution was to destroy copies of these new writings. In God's providence, this caused the church to even more cherish, try to copy and preserve these precious manuscripts.
- During this same time, from the very beginning of the ministry of the Apostles, there were those who wrote and tried to circulate their own writings among the churches. Some would even forge the names of Paul and Thomas and others to try to lend credence to their writings. This is particularly true of the groups known as the Gnostics and Docetists. One key feature of their early teaching was that Jesus wasn't fully human, but only appeared to be. These are what are known as the apocryphal and pseudepigraphal writings.
- There are also many writings that were good and helpful (some of which we still have) that also were added to the mix. After the death of the Apostles, those known as the Apostolic Fathers (taught by the apostles, or their students) continued to quote and recognize their writings as Scripture, the Word of God.

### B. Canonization

- Eventually there was a movement to try to compile together the inspired writings into one body of work like what was recognized as the Old Testament. This was known as canonization ("cane" or "rod of measurement"). This was not an easy procedure, as people had various opinions and reasons why they believed certain books were to be considered as Scripture.
- What seems clear is that very early (2<sup>nd</sup> century) the 4 Gospels and Paul's letters were considered as authoritative.
- There was controversy and discussion before this issue would be agreed on in the late 300's. Even then, not everyone instantly agreed. Even in our own day, there continue to be those who think that certain books were left out in an attempt to control the church and propagate their ideas (remember The DaVinci Code).
- One big consideration in evaluating what was being done was whether the church was defining or recognizing the Scriptures. The Roman Catholic view sees this period as the church in its authority determining, the Protestant view as recognizing. The implications are many depending on how we answer that question.

### C. Manuscripts

- During this early time, what would become the canonized NT writings were copied over and over and were sent everywhere where there were followers of Jesus Christ. Consider the world then compared to now: no modern technology of printing press, computer printers, perishable nature of materials. During this time there were the ordinary mistakes that were made in such a process of hand copying. Then, when those were copied those mistakes were propagated.

- What we do not have any of the "autographs" or original documents. This isn't because of some great conspiracy, but mostly because of the perishable nature of paper and the climate in which they were written (think of the Declaration and Magna Carte in environmentally controlled boxes)
  - One of the questions that arises is how do we know, in light of such a method of copying, that we have reliable manuscripts?
  - We now have more than 5,300 Greek manuscripts of the NT, over 10,000 of the Latin Vulgate (next section), and over 9,300 of other very early versions (Coptic, Aramaic, Ethiopic, Armenian, Gothic, Persian, etc.). We have early quotations from the early "Church Fathers" and lectionaries. Altogether we have over 24,000 "early" copies of portions of the NT. Some of these are entire books of the NT, others are fragments. The benefit of this is that they can be compared that cover a large geographic area as well as over 100's of years.
  - What is amazing in comparing these manuscripts is not their differences, but their overwhelming unity. We must not ignore that there are differences, but they touch on non-essential things and many can be clearly identified as "scribal errors", and easily corrected. This is what you will see in the marginal notes of modern Bibles.
  - There are many controversies within the church over what "family" of manuscripts are more accurate to the originals, but I think that in the midst of such battles the incredible unity is often overlooked.
  - There are some very interesting statistical comparisons with other early Greek writings (Iliad, Pliny, Sophocles) and the evidence of NT manuscripts is overwhelming compared to them.
  - The amount of manuscripts is also amazing when we consider the relative illiteracy in many of the cultures, and how oral traditions were so prominent.
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- As messy as this process appears at first, there is a single truth that has brought me consolation and comfort in considering how badly men can mess things up: the sovereignty of God. Here we stand, 2,000 years after these events, and what brings me confidence that what I hold in my hand is the Word of God isn't trust in what men did or how many agreed, but that God is in control. Not only that, but He is good and faithful and would not leave His people without all that is necessary for us to know about Him, salvation, and how to order His church.
  - We do not have the "neatness" of the Book of Mormon (revealed to Joseph Smith through Urim and Thumim to produce one book) or the Quaran (revealed to Muhammad by Gabriel over 23 years). What we have is a "messy" and amazing realization of God working through frail and fallible human instruments to preserve His Word for centuries.
  - I hope that in this you grow with a profound sense of appreciation for your Bible. What you hold in your hands is what most Christians have never had in the history of the church. Its easy access probably broods a contempt or relative indifference. Because we can pick it up at any time, we often don't pick it up at all.
  - What if the Bible were banned, or rarely accessible as in other lands? What if we had one copy for all of us to share time slots? Is it any less precious because we have so many copies?