

# Studying the Bible

History and Content

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## History and Content

### Background

The Bible is a collection of 66 books that constitute the Scripture of the Christian churches. Jews accept only the first part of the Bible – the Hebrew Scriptures or the Old Testament, comprising 39 books. The New Testament comprises 27 books. Roman Catholics add apocryphal books to those adopted by other Christian bodies. The word “Bible” derives from the Greek *biblia* (“books”), which, though plural, came to be used as a singular noun and to stand for the collection which Christians regard as the Word of God. Together, according to Christian belief, these books constitute God’s revelation of what all people need to know about their origins, rebellion against God, sinful nature, salvation, spiritual development, and destiny.<sup>1</sup>

As Christians, the Bible is an important tool to support our growth with God. We know that “*All Scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*”<sup>2</sup> You may sometimes hear someone pray before they preach “Heavenly Father, as your written word becomes our spoken word may it reveal to us your Living Word.” What a great prayer that is!

The term ‘Canon’ is borrowed from Greek, in which *kanōn* means a rule. Since the 4<sup>th</sup> century *kanōn* has been used by Christians to denote an authoritative list of books belonging to the Hebrew Scriptures or the New Testament.

What qualifies a book for a place in the Canon of the Hebrew Scriptures or New Testament is not just that it is ancient, informative and helpful, and has long been read and valued by God's people, but that it has God's authority for what it says. God spoke through its human author, to teach His people what to believe and how to behave. It is not just a record of revelation, but the permanent written form of revelation. This is what we mean when we say that the Bible is ‘inspired’ and it makes the books of the Bible in this respect different from all other books.

We must remember Jesus' words: “*I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book; if anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.*”<sup>3</sup>

### The Message

#### The Hebrew Scriptures (The Old Testament)

The Old Testament as a whole is a record of how Israel's thinking advanced from creation to covenant at Sinai to a new covenant calculated to lead to a new creation. The authors of the biblical materials had defined objects in mind. Both Exodus, with its movement from slavery to worship, and Kings, with its review of the monarchical period from Solomon, to the fall of the Davidic dynasty, offer a theological assessment of a period in Israel's history. We shall see in our next Study in this series how it is vital to interpret the Old Testament in light of the New Testament, and vice versa.

<sup>1</sup> For more information, please refer to Elwell, W. A., & Beitzel, B. J. (1988). Bible. In Baker encyclopedia of the Bible (Vol. 1, p. 295). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.

<sup>2</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16

<sup>3</sup> Revelations 22:18-19

## Rabbinical approach

In the traditional format of the Christian Bible the Hebrew Scriptures are presented as a compilation of 39 separate books. This arrangement follows the general pattern of the Greek and Latin versions; but in actual fact is a misleading structure. The original rabbinic arrangement of the Jewish Scriptures in Hebrew was quite different and much more true to their essential nature. They took the form of 24 books divided into three main sections, which in some cases are further subdivided. This rabbinic format is not only much simpler and more helpful, but as we shall see, draws out the distinctive qualities and characteristics of individual documents and groups of books much more clearly. It took several centuries for the layout of the present day "Christian Bible" to be established, with the Hebrew Canon itself being formally closed about 90 AD, during rabbinic discussions at Jamnia.

The reason why Moses and the prophets wrote down God's message, and did not content themselves with delivering it orally, was sometimes to send it to another place (Jeremiah 29:1; 36:18; 51:60ff.; 2 Chronicles 21:12); but quite as often to preserve it for the future, as a memorial (Exodus 17:14), or as a witness (Deuteronomy 31:24-26), and that it might be for the time to come for ever and ever (Isaiah 30.8). The unreliability of the oral tradition was well known to the Hebrew Scripture writers. An object lesson here was the loss of the book of the Law during the wicked reigns of Manasseh and Amon: when it was rediscovered by Hilkiah its teaching came as a great shock, for it had been forgotten (2 Kings 22:23; 2 Chronicles 34). The permanent and abiding form of God's message was therefore not its spoken but its written form, and this explains the rise of the Canon of the Hebrew Scriptures.

## The Law (TORAH)

These first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures are also known as the 'Pentateuch', and the 'books of Moses' (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy). The word 'Torah' means 'instruction' rather than 'law'; the feel to Torah are the words of loving direction that a parent would give to their child to show them how to live.

## The Prophets (NEBHI'IM)

In this section of the Hebrew Bible we are presented with a beautifully poised and honed perspective on biblical prophecy, which we look at in more depth in other studies. This section flows naturally from the foundations of the Torah and show that history and oracle, act and word, are inseparable elements of prophecy. The Nebhi'im embraced:

- a) the four so-called Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings), each counted as one book; and
- b) the four so-called Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel), each counted as one book and
- c) the Twelve Minor Prophets (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi), each counted as one book.

## The Writings (KETHUBIM)

This final section of the Hebrew Scriptures was probably originally called 'Psalms'; the name of the first book in the collection serving as a title for the whole. In Luke 24:44 Jesus speaks about "the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms", he is almost certainly referring to the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures in its three main sections, in the popular way of the time. The Kethubhim, or Writings, were 11 in all, including Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, 1 & 2 Chronicles, exactly the same as those of the Protestant canon.

## The New Testament

There are 27 books in the New Testament, and like the Old Testament are not in specific chronological order. However there is a natural flow or progression which, coupled with the books of the Old Testament, provides us with a panoramic view of living in relationship with God from creation to eternity.

In the New Testament, God's new covenant is revealed in the written record of the words and works of Jesus the Messiah and His followers. Everything is new and yet the transition from the Hebrew Bible to these new documents and the events they record is completely natural, and presupposed in everything. Jesus the Messiah is the one in whom all the hopes and promises of the Hebrew Scriptures are fulfilled.

There was no Canon of the New Testament in the earliest times because of the presence of apostles or their disciples, and because of the living oral traditions. In the mid second century the apostles were dead, but their memoirs and other monuments attested their message; at the same time heresy began to arise. The Present Canon was established on the basis of the Gospels, and was seen to measure up to a specific standard.

It is clear that the Bible in itself is complete, and is a divine revelation from God through which we are able to make wise for our salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.