

The Bible

The Formation of the Canon of Scripture

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The Bible comes to us between two covers. It is all too easy to believe that this book, like almost any other book, was written that way, in a single thrust. It is puzzling, therefore, that Christians differ among themselves over the extent of their sacred book. In fact no book of anything like that size existed until many centuries after all the literature in the Bible was written. At the time of Christ all 'books' were in fact scrolls, a long piece of parchment or papyrus (or several pieces sewn together) written on one side only and rolled up round a wooden stem. In the second century, or possibly at the very end of the first, Christians were the first to invent the form of a book, separate pages written on both sides and bound together down one edge of the leaf. It was not for several more centuries that any book could be produced large enough to contain the whole of the Bible. The oldest complete Latin Bible in existence was written about 712CE in the Northumbrian monastery of Saint Bede, though Bede himself attests that he had seen a slightly earlier one, written in North Italy. Just as e-mail and texting have changed modes of communication in this century, so this development in book-production brought new possibilities.

And also problems. Which books should be included? By the time the first Latin Bible came to be put together there was pretty well unanimity among Christians in the West about which books should be included. This had not always been the case. In the early second century a powerful businessman, who disliked Judaism, attempted to leave the Old Testament on one side. He also cut out much of the New Testament which he found too Jewish, and wanted to keep only one Gospel, that of Luke. He tried to bribe the Roman church into agreement, but they returned his money to him when the conditions became clear. At the same time other forces within Christianity championed other Gospels, such as the one which contains the famous story of the young Jesus making birds out of clay and breathing upon them so that they flew away.

Another, called The Gospel of Thomas, makes exaggerated pantheistic claims for Jesus: 'I am the All. From me did the All come forth, and unto me did the All extend. Split a piece of wood and I am there. Lift up the stone and you will find me there'.

By the late second century unanimity was beginning to emerge, at any rate over the principal books, and by 200CE a bishop is writing to one of his communities, telling them to steer clear of the Gospel of Peter because the Jesus there presented is not the Jesus of the Christian faith. Before very long scribes stopped copying such texts, and they disappeared, to be discovered again in the last century in the sands of Egypt (or the vaults of libraries). The criteria of choice are not crystal clear: there were multiple factors. Obviously it was not enough that a writing should claim to be by one of the twelve apostles, or the two gospels just mentioned would have been accepted. Paul is in a class of his own, but lack of an apostolic name may account for such writings as The Shepherd of Hermas or the letter of Barnabas, which were accepted in many churches for some time, before being finally dropped. Much more important was the doctrine. A consensus was being formed about what was Christian tradition and what was not. This was, however, an interactive process: the books were normative for the tradition, but the tradition was normative for the books. By the end of the second century practically the only two books of the New Testament which were doubtful, accepted for reading in church in some places but not in others, were the letter to the Hebrews (authorship doubtful) and the Revelation to John (which seemed to suggest that Christ would reign for 1,000 years on the earth). Such a gradual movement towards consensus has been seen by many in the Church as a sign of the gentle guidance of the Spirit of God.

About the Old Testament there was another problem, which still remains unresolved today. The writings revered by the Jewish people are also an integral part of the Christian scriptures, to the extent that the person and message of Christ cannot be understood without them. The older ones, however, are all written in Hebrew or its sister-language Aramaic. Only in the last couple of centuries before the Common Era did many Jewish communities around the Mediterranean become so integrated into the Greek-speaking world that they ceased to understand Hebrew and needed a Greek version. Over several decades this translation was provided (the work seems to have been done at Alexandria, where there was a particularly important Jewish community), and other Greek writings were added, such as The Wisdom of Solomon. The result became known as The Septuagint (often abbreviated to 'LXX') from the legend that an

identical translation was made by 70 isolated scholars in 70 days.

Just as with the Christian sacred writings, there was a certain 'outer circle' of writings which were accepted as the Word of God by some and not by others. Thus, in the community of the Dead Sea Scrolls, among all the thousands of fragments found, not one is from the book of Esther, but many are from the first book of Enoch and the book of Jubilees. When the register of sacred books was standardised in Judaism – at about the same time as the Christian list – there were two 'canons' (the word means 'measuring-rod' or 'norm') within Judaism, that of the Hebrew-speaking Jews and that of the Greek-speaking Jews. The latter included not only several books excluded by the former, because they were not in the sacred language, but also a number of stories and poems. So, for example, to the Hebrew and Aramaic book of Daniel were added in Greek a couple of splendid detective stories, Susanna and Bel and the Dragon, and the lovely hymn of praise, the Canticle of the Three Young Men.

Which should the Christians follow? On linguistic grounds there was simply no question. Christianity grew up in the environment of the Greek-speaking cities of the Eastern Mediterranean. Although Matthew, perhaps John and partly Paul were writing for Christians sprung from Judaism, it was a Greek-speaking Judaism. They quote the Hebrew scriptures in Greek, normally the translation made at Alexandria a century or two earlier. So the language and scriptures of the Christian church were Greek.

After a couple of centuries Christianity had spread far enough in the West for translations of the Bible into Latin, the official language of the Western Roman Empire, to be needed. Fragments of these translations survive, and they are shoddy, clearly under-resourced work. In 383 Pope Damasus commissioned a fiery and outspoken young scholar, Jerome, to revise the translation of the New Testament. Hounded out of Rome at the death of the Pope (to his surprise – he had half-expected to be elected Pope), he withdrew to Bethlehem to translate the whole Bible. It was here that he formed the novel idea of translating from the Hebrew rather than the Greek. Strongly influenced by the greatest biblical scholar of the previous century, Origen of Caesarea, he soon formed the

concept of the *Hebraica veritas*: the only authentic version of the Old Testament is the Hebrew. Both Origen and Jerome were profoundly embarrassed by Jewish taunts about mistakes in the Greek version. Accordingly he took much less trouble over the non-Hebrew books. (He translated the book of Judith in 'one short night's work'.) Despite initial difficulties, Jerome's translation became standard in the Latin West, and is the text used in Bede's complete Latin Bible. It is called the Vulgate, meaning 'common' or 'widespread'.

Jerome's championship of the *Hebraica veritas* retained some scholarly and curiosity value. A number of theologians made the distinction between books which were normative on matters of doctrine, and those which should be read for edification only. It was only with Luther that the theory of the *Hebraica veritas* became important again, and this time for doctrinal reasons. In controversy about Purgatory, Luther was confronted with 2 Maccabees 14:26 (a Greek book), which recommends prayer 'offered for the dead so that they might be released from their sin'. He therefore rejected 2 Maccabees, and from that position, under the influence of tough controversy, went on to reject all the books of the Old Testament composed in Greek. Positions are often defined as a result of controversy, and the Roman Catholic authorities replied at the Council of Trent in 1546 by defining the Bible as including 'each and every part' of all the books, Hebrew and Greek alike.

Luther's position on the Apocrypha has been accepted by many Protestant churches, with varying degrees of rigour. Theologians accept that these later Greek books are valuable indications of the development of doctrine between the two testaments, and influenced particularly Paul's thinking. In recent decades, under the influence of the ecumenical movement, it has been customary to print these 'Deuterocanonical' books or 'Apocrypha' as part of the Bible, though often (in English-language versions) in a separate section. The major ecumenical translations, commonly used by all Christians in the French and German language spheres, certainly include them. Some of the Eastern Orthodox churches commonly include one or two other works, revered by Christians from ancient times.

No single text can give all the answers. Every text requires interpretation, and widely different interpretations have been given. The Jewish tradition held that besides the Written Law

an Oral Law, of equal validity, had been passed down from generation to generation. The Catholic tradition holds that the Bible can be read only within the tradition of the Church, in a way which some have found too prescriptive and restrictive. The Protestant tradition from the Reformation onwards has insisted that the Holy Spirit dwelling within every Christian enables each individual to arrive at the plain meaning of the Bible with less external guidance.

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