

## Bible Study Course Introduction to the Bible

### I. The Structure and Growth of the Bible

The word “Bible” came through the Latin from the Greek “Biblia”, the Books (note the plural!), by which Greek speaking Christians denoted the Scriptures. Ancient books were written on papyrus or byblos imported from Egypt, and came to be called “Biblion.” The use of the plural “Biblia” for the Scripture passed into Latin, where it was treated a singular noun, “The Book”. It thus passed into English as “The Bible.”

The Bible is in fact both one book and at the same time a library of 66 books. For the most part these 66 books are quite distinct although some were bound together originally as one work, e.g. 1 & 2 Samuel and 1 & 2 Kings (in LXX 4 books of Kingdom); Ezra and Nehemiah (possibly along with 1 & 2 Chronicles); Luke and Acts; possibly Judges and Ruth. The period during which they were written covers not less than 1500 years, the New Testament being confined to about the last 100 years of that time. The books were written over quite a large area, ranging from Italy in the West, to Persia and Mesopotamia in the East. The writers were not only parted by time and place, but were greatly diverse in background. There were Kings, Priests, Prophets, Shepherds, Peasants, Fisherman, Statesmen, Soldiers, Courtiers, at least one Doctor of Medicine, and one of Law and one ex-Tax Collector!

Then, too, we find every kind of literary method used from biography, personal memoirs and diaries, correspondence, to poetry, parable and allegory, prophecy and clear dogmatic teaching. It is truly a library, and yet with all its diversity, there is a unity from beginning to end. True it is not the apparent technical unity of a machine, but rather the living unity of a plant or organism. Nor is this unity the product and work of a human anthologist, a compiler or editor, but somehow over the centuries of time it has grown until it has reached what we now know as The Bible.

These 66 books are divided into two unequal halves – 39 in the first division which we commonly call the Old Testament, and 27 in the second, which we commonly call the New Testament.

Note: -

#### A. The Old and New Testaments

- i. The word “Testament” came to be used of this major two fold division of the Bible, due to a mistranslation of a Greek word which meant a) arrangement, disposition, testament or will, covenant or poet.

In the LXX version, the oldest translation of the OT into Greek, this Greek word was used to translate the Hebrew word for “Covenant,” and was thus understood by all readers of the Greek OT. It is interesting to note that there was another Greek word meaning “covenant” or “pact” but the LXX translators rejected it because it suggested a pact between equals, whereas the former Greek word was better suited to the Biblical idea of “covenant” – God’s pact with His people freely made by Him in Sovereign Grace. When the LXX was translated into Latin (from whence the Latin Vulgate), two words vied for the honour of translating the Greek word used for “covenant” – “TESTAMENTUM” (meaning last Will and Testament) favoured by European scholars, because they seemingly did not understand the second meaning of the Greek word, see b., and “INSTRUMENTUM” (meaning legal and binding agreement or document) favoured by African scholars.

In the end Europe won and the word “Testamentum” was used and thus passed in the English as “Testament.” It would have been interesting if the word “Instrumentum” had won, and we had in English “The Old Instrument and The New Instrument.”

The use of the word “testament” is in many ways misleading, for most people, if they understand it at all, do NOT understand it as the books of expressing the Old Covenant, and those expressing the New, but rather as a Last Will and Testament. It is important for us to understand this word

“Covenant,” since it is used to cover the whole Bible. It is unfortunate that in the AV the word “Covenant” appears in the OT and “Testament” largely appears in the New. The Revised and modern versions have translated it uniformly as “Covenant,” see Gen 9:9, 16; 15:8-10, 17-21; Exodus 24:3-8; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Matt 26:28; 1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6; Heb 7:22.

The Biblical sense of “Covenant” means a solemn pact or agreement initiated by God in His love and grace, freely bestowed upon us, and ratified by the shedding of precious blood and death. By this He promises to save, redeem, forgive, and share His life and gifts. It has the sense of mutual belonging; a kind of marriage bond and relationship; an incorporation into God’s Family and Household.

- ii. Thus the 39 books of the Old, PREPATORY Covenant illustrate and explain God’s ways with His own, leading up and pointing to the NEW and ETERNAL Covenant, expressed and explained in the last 27 books.

Now many will ask, “Do we really need the Old Covenant when we have the New? Has it not been rendered completely obsolete?” We have to remember that the whole OT is vital preparation and foundation for the NT. The Bible for the Lord Jesus, the Apostles, and the Early Church literally consisted exclusively of the books of the Old Covenant. All that we have in the New flowered and fruited on the stock of the Old.

Remember: -

The New is in The Old contained.	The Old is in The New explained.
The New is in The Old concealed	The Old is in The New revealed.
The New is in The Old enfolded.	The Old is in The New unfolded.

- iii. In our studies “The Aim and Scope of the Bible” we have already pointed out the threefold theme in the Scriptures. This theme binds both Old and New together: -

A. The Mediator of the Covenant.

Matt 1:1-17; Luke 3:23-38; Heb 8:6; 1 Tim 2:5.

The Messiah is the focal point of the Old; the Saviour of the New – the Messiah Saviour is the heart of all.

Note: -

1. Luke 24:27, 44-45
2. How immeasurably poorer we would be without Messianic prophecies, e.g. Gen 3:15; Psalm 22; Isaiah 53, etc, etc.
3. Also the prophecies of His coming glory and Kingdom – cf. Isaiah, Ezekiel, Micah, Daniel, etc., etc.
4. Think of 1 Chronicles 1 – 9 – consisting of genealogies. They are nothing in themselves. Yet they are part of the authentication of Christ as the seed of the woman, the seed of Abraham, the seed of David.
5. Could we really understand His Priesthood without the OT?

B. The Covenant in His blood Rev 5:6

John 1:29. The title “Lamb of God” carried great meaning to the Jewish hearers. It meant to them sacrifice for sin, the Passover deliverance and redemption; Matt 26:28 (Passover). The Lamb slain, precious blood being shed, is foundational through both Old and New.

Note: -

1. How could we understand the Atonement without the OT and especially the offerings? See Leviticus.
2. What would we understand by “Covenant in His Blood” without the OT?
3. How could we understand the Blood of Christ – its cleansing, covering and “making nigh” power without the illustrations of the OT?

### C. The People of the Covenant

Heb 11: esp. 39-40 Acts 7: 38 op. Heb 2:12. In the LXX the Greek word "Ekklesia," used in NT for "church," is used for the Hebrew word, "kahal," translated "congregation" in the AV, RV thus the Early Church, which used the LXX version of the OT saw that it was one company of the Redeemed in Old and New.

Note: -

1. Heb 11:10 cf 12:22-24; Rev 21:12, 14 (12 Tribes, 12 Apostles)
2. Gal 3:7; 6:16
3. Eph 2:11-14
4. 1 Cor 10:1-11

- iv. Without the Old Covenant we are in grave danger of misunderstanding many things, or at least not having a balanced understanding. Nearly every major Biblical idea or conception finds its origin within the Old.
- v. We also need the OT in other ways. For example, to understand the Book of Revelation we need an understanding of Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah, and Malachi. Indeed, without the OT the symbols figures and types used in the New have little meaning or are open to misinterpretation.

### B. The Arrangement of the Books

- i. There are three main arrangements of the books – the Hebrew: the LXX or Hellenist; the Final or Christian. The whole subject of the way in which the various books came to occupy their final positions is fascinating. We will deal firstly with the Hebrew arrangement and then the LXX and final arrangement together. We ought to note that within these main arrangements there was a good deal of variation.
  1. The Hebrew Arrangement of the Books of the Old Covenant
    - a) The Law (*Torah*) Gen, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy
    - b) The Prophets (*Nevi'im*) subdivided: -
      - i. The Former; Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings
      - ii. The Latter; Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, the 12 minor prophets.
    - c) The Writings (*Kethuvim*) Subdivided: -
      - i. Psalms, Proverbs, Job
      - ii. The Five Scrolls (*Megilloth*), Song of Songs, Ruth, laments, Ecclesiastes, Esther
      - iii. Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles

Note: -

- a) How did this three-fold Hebrew division of the OT take place? We cannot with any certainty state its origin! It is often suggested that it represents the stages of growth in the Hebrew Bible, and its recognition part by part as canonical. We shall say more about this later.
- b) It is interesting to note that roughly we have here in the first five books – the nucleus of OT faith; in the second division, objective expansion and interpretation of the first; in the third, subjective expansion and interpretation.
- c) We can however say that the Law, the first five books, called by the Jews "The Five Fifths" were associated in their main body with one another from an early date, and were the first to be recognized.

There seems to have been no variation in the order of the books

- d) The second division, the Prophets, is interesting since it contains a large amount of history i.e. the former prophets. These books were not included merely because prophets were responsible for their writing, but because it was history interpreted. This is true of Joshua to Kings. The latter Prophets contain prophecy as generally understood. The main point of interest here is the exclusion of Daniel, and the gathering of the twelve books into one book. We should also note that there was a certain amount of variation in order of books in the latter prophets.
- e) The third division, the writings, is a little more difficult to understand. It seems to be almost miscellaneous. This division had the greatest variation in the order of its books. We give the most general and accepted above.

We can understand the Psalms (the Hymnal of OT Church,) Proverbs and Job, being put together, as also the Five Scrolls, so called, because one of them was read at each of the great festivals (in order, Passover, Pentecost, Anniversary of Jerusalem's destruction, the feast of Tabernacles, Purim). It is not so easy to understand why Daniel is here, nor why Ezra, Nehemiah, Chronicles, in that quite unchronological order!! One feels that there must be spiritual meaning behind it.

2. The Final Arrangement (LXX and Christian) of the books of both Old and New Covenants.

A. The Old Covenant

Twelve	<u>The Pentateuch.</u>	Gen. Exod, Lev, Num, Deut
	<u>The Historical Books</u>	Josh, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther.
	<u>The Poetical Books</u>	Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs
	<u>The Prophetical Books</u>	Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, the (Hosea – Malachi)

Note: - The Final arrangement of the OT came to us via LXX and Latin Vulgate. The LXX or Hellenist arrangement was a roughly chronological one. Whether it was based on older arrangements we cannot dogmatically state. In this rearrangement of the Hebrew Bible, there were many variations, but it finally resolved itself into the arrangement we have today. We must note Ruth's place with Judges, Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, Esther, at the end of Kings is an approximate chronological order Lamentations is added to Jeremiah; and Daniel to the Major Prophets.

B. The New Covenant

<u>The Gospels</u>	Matthew, Mark, Luke, John
<u>The Historical</u>	Acts
<u>The Didactical</u>	Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Gal, Eph, Phil, Col, 1 & 2 Thess, 1 & 2 Tim, Titus, Philemon,
<u>The Prophetical</u>	Heb, James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2 & 3 John, Jude Revelation

Note: -

- a) The 27 books of the New Testament consist of five narrative books, twenty-one letters (personal or treatises), and one book of visions. The four-fold division corresponds in some ways with the Old Covenant.
- b) How did the arrangement come about? The individual Gospels were originally circulating on their own various locations. Mark, Peter's young companion, put the gospel preached by Peter into writing at Rome; Matthew circulated in Palestine and was based largely on collections of the Lord's sayings; Luke wrote a two volume history for Gentiles – Luke and Acts. These were bound in one at the beginning. It probably has in it much of the Gospel as Paul preached it. At the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century John writes his Gospel, when the others were already circulating.

By the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century the four Gospels were brought together, and an amazing four-fold picture of Christ emerged. When this happened Acts was separated from Luke and circulated on its own, or sometimes with the general letters (James, 1 & 2 Peter, Jude)

Paul's letters were at first kept by churches or individuals to whom they were addressed, but by the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century they had been collected together under one cover and entitled "The Apostle."

Gradually these collections came together and the arrangement we have now grew. Revelation and Hebrews were the two major works over which there was much discussion, along with some of the small letters, and it was not until the 4<sup>th</sup> Century that they were finally given universal recognition. As the collection grew there was much variation in the order in which books or letters appeared. Nowhere is this clearer than in Revelation, which occupied various positions other than the final one for some centuries. The Apostle John did not write it as a conclusion, for there was no NT to conclude at that point! It was under God's hand that it was placed at the conclusion of the Bible. And this is also true of the final positioning of all the other books.

### C. The Canon of Scripture

- i. We have now covered something of the growth of the Bible and the arrangement of the books. Now we must ask how was it decided which books should be included. Who made so solemn a decision and when? It is over this question that we use the word "canon." All those books included we call "canonical," and those excluded, "apocryphal."

The word "canon" came to us through Latin and Greek from a Semitic word "kaneh" meaning "read" (from which we get the English word "cane" then "canal" and "channel," etc.) and because of its use by the Ancient World for measuring, it came to mean "measuring rod" or carpenter's rule. It seems to be applied not only to that which measures, but that which is measured.

It thus has two meanings: -

1. An index, list or catalogue – a certain group or number comprising something.
2. A rule, standard, law. The value and authority contained within those things.

By the 4<sup>th</sup> Century it had come to be applied to the Bible, which had arrived at its conclusive arrangement. The term covered not only the list of the books recognized as inspired which comprised it, but the authority of those books above all others. They were recognized as supremely authoritative for faith and life. We must be clear that the books of the Bible have not become authoritative because they are canonical. They are canonical because over the years they have been universally recognized as possessing Divine Authority. We should also point out that no church councils, or other groups, "canonized" Scripture. They merely recognized what was already acknowledged over many years and in wide circles.

### A. The Canon of the Old Covenant

- a) The process was a long and gradual one. It would seem reasonable that it followed approximately the line of the Hebrew arrangement, although we have no definite authority for this. Certainly by our lord's time the Old Covenant was complete. See Luke 24:44

(Note Luke 11:51 cf Matt 23:35. Abel – Zechariah. See Gen 4:8; 2 Chronicles 24:21.)

It seems quite clear that our Lord, the Apostles and the Early Church viewed the OT in its Hebrew arrangement as Divinely authoritative and inspired. Indeed, we must add that from the very beginning it would seem that the books, which now comprise our OT, were recognized as such. The very fact of debate as to whether the widely held view that they were divinely inspired was valid.

- b) Let us consider these three main divisions: -
- 1) The Law From the very beginning the Pentateuch was recognized as THE Word of God. It was the first part to be officially recognized, probably at an early date, and with little if any controversy.
  - 2) The Prophets The two main divisions of Hebrew Bible were recognized for the most part, it would seem, by Ezra's time (mid 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC) By 2<sup>nd</sup> Century BC they were fully recognized, although over Ezekiel there was much debate (due to his involved visions and difficulty in reconciling Ezekiel 40-48 with the Pentateuch regulations!)
  - 3) The Writings It is over this division we have the greatest difficulty. It seems certain that by our Lord's time, it was officially recognized, and in all probability much earlier. Yet as late as 70AD there was heated debate about Esther (it seemed so pagan), Ecclesiastes (not very orthodox), Canticles (Song of Songs) and Proverbs. It is interesting to note that the conclusion of these debates was the absolute recognition of all these books as canonical.
- c) Apocryphal writings, although viewed in many cases as valuable, have never been accorded by the Rabbis the same recognition as the canonical books. It was the uniform tradition of the Jews that Malachi ended the prophetic and scriptural inspiration.

The LXX included a number of these apocryphal writings, and although they were included, Greek-speaking Jews never mixed them up with the canonical. When however, Greek-speaking Gentile Christians began to read the LXX they tended to accept the whole as Scripture, making no distinction.

Jerome, the greatest scholar amongst the Church Fathers, was the one who clearly defined the difference. In fact, it is to him we owe the term "apocryphal books." Nevertheless, the Roman Catholic Church finally accepted a number of these books as canonical, which the Reformers and Protestants refused to do.

We must however say this – that while there has been universal recognition of 39 books, which comprise the OT from an early date, there has never been anywhere a unanimous verdict on the Apocrypha.

## B. The Canon of the New Covenant

- a) The process of the NT canon was again a gradual one, though not as long as the OT. Nearly all the NT as we now have it, was written by the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century.
- b) The Lord Himself had promised that the Holy Spirit would lead the Apostles in all Truth. John 14:26; 16:12-15. (Note Past, Present, Future) and the NT (Past – Gospels, Present – Acts – Jude, Future – Revelation) was the written deposit of the Truth.
- c) By 140 AD the Gospels, Acts and Apostle (writings of Paul), were recognized as divinely inspired and authoritative, with one exception, to be placed alongside the OT Canon. See 2 Peter 3:15-16. This meant 18 books out of 27 were considered canonical. Only John's Gospel caused some dispute toward the end of 2nd Century. But after that it was universally accepted. It was about that time that these books were first called the New Testament (by Tertullian).
  - i. By 230 AD only Hebrews, 2 Peter, 1, 2 & 3 John, James and Jude were disputed along with some apocryphal literature that some would have included (Epistle of Barnabus, The Shepherd of Hermes, Didache) Revelation was more or less generally accepted by then.
  - ii. By the 4<sup>th</sup> Century the 27 books of NT as we now have it were universally recognized. (3<sup>rd</sup> Synod of Carthage 397 ad) It was this stated "besides the

canonical Scriptures nothing was to be read in the Church under the title of The Divine Scriptures.”

iii. It is clear that the apostolic authorship counted much with the early church in its recognition of these books. This is the reason for the flood of NT apocryphal literature under apostolic names. It is interesting to see that the Church gradually sifted and sorted out what was divinely inspired from what was not. All scholarship agrees that the literature is nowhere near the NT standard.

ii. Now let us summarise this whole matter: -

The Canon of Scripture grew over many, many years, and was searchingly selective. No religious body or council “made Scripture” or canonized books.” They simply officially acknowledged what was universally recognized already. To this we must ask the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit in the Church and in the individual not only then, nor subsequently, but now, to the Divine Authority of these books. Indeed the supreme wonder must be the oversight of the Holy Spirit in the whole process of the Bible’s formation from beginning to end!

III. The Structure and Growth of the Bible

Questions

1. State briefly why we need the Old Testament to have a proper understanding of the New Testament.
2. What is the Biblical meaning of the word “Covenant”? Why is it that there is misunderstanding about the real meaning of the original word, meaning covenant?
3. Describe briefly the Hebrew arrangement of the Books of the Old Covenant
4. Describe the final arrangement of the New Covenant, and how it came about.
5. Why is it that the four Gospels are so remarkable?
6. Write a couple of sentences on the part played by the writings of the Apostle Paul in the New Testament.
7. How did the books of the Old Testament reach their final arrangement?
8. What is the meaning of the term “canon”? Trace the growth of this meaning.
9. State in your own words what you know about “The Apocrypha.”
10. Write a paragraph on the canonicity of the New Testament.