



Beginning Biblical Studies

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Top: A portion of the Tel Arad archeological site located twelve miles west of the Dead Sea. Visible are the foundations of ancient homes, courtyards, and paved streets. King David established a fortress here, but the area has been home to many ancient peoples.

Bottom: A restored tile mosaic of a breadbasket surrounded by two fish, originally dating back to the fifth century CE. The mosaic is located in the Church of the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee.

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FOREWORD

Imagine that a friend comes to you, thrilled after hearing the leader of a new Christian sect declare, “I am the Lamb of God described in the Bible’s book of Revelation, and I will show you the way to the good life and prosperity!”

Or picture this: A farmer receives a mailing from “Reverend Mike” guaranteeing economic security with the pledge, “Are you having problems getting a fair price for your farm produce? Your economic situation will improve! God promises this in Deuteronomy 28:8: ‘The LORD will affirm his blessing upon you, on your barns and on all your undertakings, blessing you in the land that the LORD, your God, gives you.’”

Or again, imagine you hear a frustrated parent threatening a naughty child in the toy store. “You’d better behave, if you want to be a good Christian and go to heaven! Remember what Jesus said in Matthew 5:48—you must ‘be perfect as God is perfect.’”

None of these incidents is fiction. The biblical references noted above do appear in the Bible, and people have used them as described. People quote the Bible to “prove” all kinds of things. Politicians quote the Bible to support expanding military budgets, while pacifists support antiwar protests using the same book. Death penalty proponents offer arguments from the Bible, and so do those who oppose it. Proabortionists and antiabortionists both use the Bible to support their arguments.

How can the same book lead to clearly contradictory conclusions? And how can Christians understand and evaluate such claims? To begin, one needs to understand what the Bible actually contains, the historical contexts when it was written, its key themes, images, and concepts, and various approaches to its interpretation. For all Christians, no matter their denomination, the Bible stands as the foundation of religious faith and practice, but obviously different believers approach these writings differently.

*“Ignorance of Scripture
is ignorance of Christ.”*

— SAINT JEROME

Even people who do not claim Christian faith recognize that the Bible has influenced nearly two thousand years of Western civilization. Much of the great art, literature, music, and drama of the Western world has been inspired by the Bible. Numerous critical political events, even wars, have been based on its contents. Many notions foundational to U.S. democracy have their beginnings in biblical laws dating back twenty-five hundred years: the right to a fair trial, fair compensation for labor, equality for all under the law. Understanding the Bible, then, can offer insights into oneself

and others as human, as Christian, as American, or all of these.



USING THIS BOOK

This book is intended as a companion to a study Bible, which contains background articles on each book of the Bible and footnotes to the biblical text. Because many people today have had little or no experience with the Bible, this book is written with true beginners in mind; it does not assume familiarity with the contents or origins of the Bible or its major events, characters, and themes. This also accounts for

certain features and occasional repetitions in the text. Major sections begin with a listing of key words and concepts, followed by a brief overview of the section, and then a fully detailed explanation and discussion. Since many teachers might wish to use selected biblical texts along with the material in the following pages, background explanations focus on basic, foundational information. Teachers and students will find additional material on selected topics in the appendices.

With this book and a study Bible, good intentions, and careful study, anyone can come to a deeper understanding of one of the world's great collections of sacred scriptures.

Style Note on Biblical and Historical References

Biblical book and verse references:

Gen 11:1–9 the first number indicates chapter 11 in the book of Genesis, and numbers after the colon refer to verses 1 through 9 within that chapter (some sources use a comma instead of a colon: Gen 11, 1–9)

Gen 12 book of Genesis, all of chapter 12

Gen 1–3 book of Genesis, all of chapters 1 through 3

Gen 37:1—50:26 book of Genesis, chapter 37 verse 1 through chapter 50 verse 26

Abbreviations for historical periods and dates:

BCE Before the Common Era, formerly BC, before Christ; refers to time before the birth of Jesus

CE The Common Era, formerly AD, meaning *anno domini*, Latin for “year of our Lord”; refers to time after the birth of Jesus

ca. Latin for *circa*, meaning “approximately”; dates from ancient times often can be approximated at best

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CHAPTER

HOW THE BIBLE WAS FORMED

Key Terms and Concepts

Old Testament canon

New Testament canon

Hebrew canon

Greek canon

Septuagint (LXX)

Apocrypha

Whatever one may believe about the Bible, it remains one of the most influential books in human history. At least parts of it are published today in more than two thousand languages. How did the Bible originate, and how were its different versions formed?

First it is good to recall that the Bible is not, as it first appears, a single book. As stated above, it is a kind of library, a collection of many books, written in different historical periods by various individuals and groups, containing many different kinds of writing. Viewed as literature, the Bible can accurately be called a literary anthology, a broad collection of diverse kinds of literature including poetry, prayers, narratives, gospels, letters, and others. Even within a single biblical book, there might be numerous smaller literary units; any of the Bible's Gospels, for example, includes proverbs, parables, exorcisms, conflict stories, passion narratives, and more.

A first look at the Bible raises several questions: Who produced this collection of writings? Why were these books included and not others? Who decided what was and was not worth preserving? As already noted, Jews and Christians both have a set of books that they call the Bible, but these Bibles differ. Why?

To answer these questions, four basic stages in a lengthy process will be outlined: events, oral traditions, written traditions, and canons. The Bible itself clearly indicates how and why the Bible came to be:

Attend, my people, to my teaching [*torah*];
listen to the words of my mouth.

I will open my mouth in story,
drawing lessons from of old.

We have heard them, we know them;
our ancestors have recited them to us.

We do not keep them from our children;
we recite them to the next generation,

The praiseworthy and mighty deeds
of the LORD,
the wonders that he performed.

God set up a decree in Jacob,
established a law in Israel:
What he commanded our ancestors,
they were to teach their children;
That the next generation might come
to know,
children yet to be born.

In turn they were to recite them to
their children,
that they too might put their trust
in God,
And not forget the works of God,
keeping his commandments.

—Ps 78:1–7



FORMATION OF THE BIBLE: A FOUR-STAGE PROCESS

1. EVENTS: A People's History Interpreted as Experiences of the Divine

Before proceeding it is important to point out that the books in the Bible were not written in the order in which they now appear. The most formative experience—and one of the earliest formed traditions—in Old Testament history, the Exodus, is not found at the very beginning of the Bible. This event of Exodus, the liberation of Hebrew slaves from Egypt, was understood to reveal Yahweh as Israel's mighty deliverer and to designate the Hebrews as a people, a community belonging to Yahweh. This foundational saving event began a centuries-long history of the relationship between the God of Israel and Yahweh's chosen people. Further experiences in Israelite history were interpreted as ongoing revelation of God and God's life-giving plan for all creation.

Eventually, stories about the origin of the world and of Israel were also preserved and placed at the beginning of the sacred writings.

2. ORAL TRADITIONS: Events and Their Religious Meanings Passed On by Word of Mouth

Israel's experiences of Yahweh, and most importantly, the religious significance of those experiences, were considered so important that the faith community passed them on from generation to generation in oral traditions. A primarily oral culture, ancient Israel employed numerous spoken forms such as legends, poetry, prayers, law codes, and genealogies to tell the story of their relationship with Yahweh. Modern readers, however, are cautioned against imagining the process of oral tradition like a game of "telephone" in which every successive repetition loses or distorts the original meaning. Cultures that normally transmit important material by word of mouth are highly accurate in communicating essential material. Because important events and ideas are passed on by and within a highly attentive community accustomed to such communication, any mistakes are quickly identified and easily corrected.

Thus while orally transmitted material may vary in details, it preserves accuracy in essential meaning. This quality of oral tradition can be seen today in jokes told and retold in various contexts; those who pass on the joke might change geographical details to suit their own locale, but the all-important punch-line remains essentially the same. A second earmark of oral tradition is that it is not overly concerned with factual accuracy about when, where, and how events happened; it is the significance of such happenings that is emphasized. Today, a man telling his children about how he met their mother might at one time say they shared lunch and another time describe a wonderful dinner; what will remain unchanged,

however, will be the fact that he was immediately attracted by her charming sense of humor. Third, in order to highlight the significance of certain experiences, oral tradition often describes people and events as bigger than life. A modern example would be the well-known “fish story”: perhaps a small child struggles for five minutes to land a six-inch fish, but retold by a proud grandfather who wants to underscore the child’s perseverance, the story might describe a two-foot fish that fought for an hour before finally being hauled ashore. Fourth, oral transmission rarely if ever expresses meaning by using precise definitions. Religious interpretations arise out of the experience of the faith community over generations, and such profound significance is communicated best by vivid stories about meaningful events. If someone wishes to understand friendship, for example, a dictionary definition would communicate much less of that reality than a few stories about loyal, faithful friends.

3. WRITTEN TRADITIONS: Selected Material Gathered and Edited into Written Collections

All four earmarks of oral tradition described above are still found in many parts of the Bible, because these characteristics frequently found their way into written traditions. As the Israelites’ history stretched across centuries, it became more and more important to preserve accounts of their experience as Yahweh’s people. For various reasons, over many years the Israelites were scattered into various parts of the ancient world, and so written traditions were gathered together in diverse historical, geographical, political, and social situations. While written traditions were forming, oral transmission continued as well; as a result, those who compiled written traditions selected and edited writings based on a broad range of sources, always keeping in mind the perspective and needs of the particular group for whom the material was composed. Sometimes

writers presented the same essential content in variant accounts derived from different sources without bothering to explain or reconcile inconsistencies. For example, at one point in the story of Noah, God instructs Noah to take one pair of every kind of animal into the ark; however, a few verses later God requires seven pairs of some animals and one pair of others (Gen 6:19–20, 7:2–3). Such seeming contradictions indicate the use of several written sources in composing a single book.

4. CANONS ESTABLISHED: Authoritative Writings Determined by Faith Community

The word *canon* comes from Greek *kanon*, meaning a rule or measure; the term thus implies both criteria used to measure something and the result of such testing. In general, a canon refers to a collection of works considered authoritative because they have met a particular standard or measure. For example, professional musicians speak of the canon of Western music, and literary experts refer to the canon of American literature. In relation to the Bible, the canon is the set of writings accepted as having supreme authority for faith life; writings designated as canonical have measured up to certain criteria, and so are included in the Bible. It is important to realize that canonization of certain Scriptures resulted from a lengthy communal process rather than the decision of a single religious leader or council. Writings that were repeatedly and consistently used for prayer, guidance, teaching, and interpretation of the community’s experience with God gradually gained acceptance as normative for the community’s faith, thus becoming canonical. However, as already noted, there are several different canons and so several different Bibles. Development of the Old Testament canon, which differs in Protestant and Catholic Bibles, will be explored first, followed by the New Testament canon, which is the same for all Christians.



OLD TESTAMENT CANONS: LONG PROCESS, DIFFERENT CONCLUSIONS

Understanding how the Old Testament canon was formed requires revisiting the story of Israel as the people of God. More than three thousand years ago, a group of Hebrew slaves in ancient Egypt escaped to freedom, and after years of struggle in the desert began a new life in Canaan, in the territory of modern Israel and the West Bank. Through this event, called the Exodus, the Hebrews came to know one God, Yahweh, whom they believed had liberated them and chosen them for a special covenant relationship. For centuries this faith community of Hebrews collected and handed on stories of their ongoing experiences with their God. As their history unfolded, the people formed a single kingdom or monarchy, then two separate kingdoms, Israel and Judah; both Israel and Judah were eventually destroyed by much larger, more powerful empires, and survivors of the second destruction endured decades of exile in Babylonia, far from Canaan. Through all these events, the relationship of the people of Israel with God unfolded, and they continued to hand on both oral and written accounts of their faith life.

After the Babylonian exile (587–539 BCE), some Israelites remained in the territory where they had been transplanted, while others settled elsewhere, especially in Egypt. Still others returned to their ancient promised land to rebuild their lives and hopes; among them was a group of priests who selected material from many available accounts in order to form a collection of five books. This set of writings, called the Torah or Pentateuch, contained the people's most important sacred myths, legends, law codes, and teachings, many already centuries old. Biblical scholars generally agree that the five books of the Torah/Pentateuch were accepted as normative for Jewish faith by ca. 400 BCE, and the

prophetic books probably reached similar status by ca. 200 BCE. After return from Babylon, the Israelites, then commonly called Judeans and later Jews, remained under the power of a succession of foreign empires. Contact with diverse cultures brought new questions and struggles to their ongoing relationship with Yahweh, and so new pieces of literature were added to their collection of sacred writings.

Beginning ca. 333 BCE, the Jews lived under Greek influence for more than two and a half centuries. During this time, they developed further scriptures. These included wisdom books, accounts of their struggle against religious oppression, and strange, symbolic writings called *apocalypses* that looked forward to a new age of freedom under God. Though some Jews in the ancient homeland resisted anything Greek, including the language, other Jews living elsewhere adopted Greek as their first language. Consequently, beginning ca. 250 BCE, a group of Jews in Alexandria of Egypt translated their sacred scriptures from Hebrew and Aramaic into Greek. The Greek name for this translation, completed ca. 132 BCE, is the Septuagint (abbreviated LXX). This name and its abbreviation, both referring to the rounded number seventy, come from an ancient document that states that seventy-two scholars completed the translation in seventy-two days.

Thus it came to be that by the time of Jesus, the sacred scriptures of Judaism were available in two languages, Hebrew and Greek. However, these two collections were not exactly the same; the Greek translation contained more material than the Hebrew version. Besides the Hebrew writings, the Septuagint included several books written during the centuries of Greek domination and even later. By the time of Jesus, the Greek language was so widespread that many Jews used the Septuagint primarily, if not exclusively, as their sacred scriptures.

Near the end of the first century CE, the Christian religion was spreading far and wide.

Some Jews had claimed Jesus as the hoped-for messiah, while others rejected this belief. It appears that around 85–90 CE, Jews who did not believe in Jesus as Messiah/Christ definitively separated from those who did. For their part, Jewish Christians continued to use the Torah, the Prophets, and some of the later writings for study and prayer. By this time Christians were circulating writings about Jesus among Jews as well as non-Jews. Such a situation presented members of Judaism with the need to clearly designate which sacred scriptures would be considered normative for Jewish faith; certainly they would not accept writings claiming that Jesus, executed as a criminal by the Romans, was God's messiah. But regarding their traditional sacred texts, Jews in Palestine and Jews in Egypt came to different conclusions.

Jews living in Palestine based their faith on the authority of sacred books originally written in Hebrew, while Jews in Alexandria of Egypt settled upon the Greek collection, the Septuagint. This set contained all the books of the Hebrew canon translated into Greek, but

also seven additional books reflecting influences from the Greek period of Jewish history, as well as several additions to Daniel and Esther. The Palestinian scriptures, written in the Hebrew language, came to be known as the Hebrew canon while the Greek version, the Septuagint, formed the Greek canon. Since ca. 90 CE to this day, members of the Jewish faith have continued to claim the Hebrew canon as their authoritative scriptures, their Bible.

In the beginning of Christianity, there was no “New Testament,” for it had not yet been written. Christians regularly used the Greek canon, the Septuagint, as their guide for teaching and worship, and to interpret the significance of Jesus. Ultimately it became the Christian Old Testament. About 400 CE, Jerome produced a translation of the Bible into Latin, then the common language of the people. His translation, called the *Vulgate* (meaning “common”), continued to use books of the Greek canon as the Old Testament, and his work became the standard Christian Bible of the West well into the Middle Ages.

ADDITIONAL MATERIAL IN THE SEPTUAGINT (LXX)

When the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into the Greek language in the third and second centuries before Jesus, a variety of material was added to the collection,

- 1 Maccabees
- 2 Maccabees
- Additions to Daniel (Song of Three Young Men, Susanna, Bel and the Dragon)
- Tobit
- Judith
- Additions to Esther
- Baruch
- Sirach (or Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sirach, named Ecclesiasticus in Latin)
- Wisdom (or Wisdom of Solomon)

including books originally written in Greek. This material is part of the Catholic canon, but is not included in the Old Testament of Protestant Bibles:

IN BRIEF: OLD TESTAMENT CANONS

HEBREW CANON

Also called the Hebrew Scriptures, a collection of books dealing with the covenant between Yahweh and Israel; originally written in Hebrew language; today, the entire Jewish Bible, also called the Tanak

After the Protestant reformation, Martin Luther used the Hebrew Canon for the Old Testament and this is still used by Protestants today.

GREEK CANON

All the books in the Hebrew canon translated into the Greek language, *PLUS* seven other books, additions to Esther, and additions to Daniel; originally written in the Greek language; this collection was also called by its Greek name, the Septuagint (abbreviated LXX)

After the Protestant Reformation, Catholics continued to use the Greek Canon (Septuagint) as Old Testament.

The earliest Christians used the Greek canon as their sacred scriptures; there was no “New Testament” yet. The New Testament canon was agreed upon ca. 400 CE. Today, Protestants and Catholics have the same 27 books in the New Testament.

During the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, Martin Luther raised a number of questions about the accuracy and authority of the Bible and produced his own translation, using the oldest version of the Old Testament, the thirty-nine books of the Hebrew canon. In response to Luther, in 1546 the Catholic Church’s Council of Trent officially declared the canon of the Catholic Bible: forty-six books of the Greek canon and twenty-seven books of the New Testament. The seven additional books and additions to Daniel and Esther in the Catholic Bible were called *deuterocanonical* or “second canon” by Catholics and *apocryphal* by Protestants. One further difference among Christian Old Testament canons is found in the Eastern Orthodox churches, which adds 2 Esdras, also called 4 Ezra, to the Greek canon.

Once the process and meaning of canonization is understood, the meaning of *apocryphal* books or *apocrypha* can be easily explained. As seen

above, a great number of writings was produced during many centuries of Israelite history. Those that did not meet one or several “measures” for canonicity are called *apocryphal* (hidden) books. Though they were not accepted as authoritative scriptures and therefore “hidden” (excluded from use in public worship), the apocrypha often provide valuable historical, cultural, and theological insight into the Bible, since they were written in similar times, places, and circumstances as the canonical books. As with the biblical canons, the apocrypha are divided into Old Testament and New Testament categories, and many such books or fragments have been discovered. Old Testament apocrypha include, for example, *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, the *Book of Jubilees*, and the *Apocalypse of Baruch*.

All Christians consider these and many other writings apocryphal; one difference is that Protestants add to the category of Old Testament

apocrypha the material in the Greek canon not found in the Hebrew canon: Tobit, Judith, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Wisdom, Sirach, Baruch, and additions to Esther and Daniel. While these writings are included in the Old Testament canon by Catholics as deuterocanonical books, for Protestants they are part of the Old Testament Apocrypha. For this reason, most Protestant Bibles either omit these additions to the Hebrew canon, or place them in a separate section labeled “Apocrypha.”



NEW TESTAMENT CANON

The process of canonization for New Testament writings resembles that of the Old Testament, though it unfolded over fewer centuries. Like the older scriptures, the New Testament books began with material passed on by word of mouth; in this case, of course, the various accounts focused on Jesus. Some Christians passed on Jesus’ parables, others told of his many healings, and still others recounted passion narratives interpreting Jesus’ suffering and death. Over decades, some of these oral accounts were written down, and later both oral and written traditions were sifted and edited in order to compose various “gospels.” Early Christians also wrote letters of instruction and encouragement to local churches, as well as other writings rooted in their faith in Jesus as the messiah, the promised anointed one of God.

For several centuries, Christians were flexible in choosing scriptures to be used for worship, moral guidance, and teaching. But as time passed, some writings appeared that were thought to undermine or contradict some particular element of Christian belief. As a result, the Christian faith community, like the Jews before them, asked, “Which writings accurately represent the foundation of our faith?” In other words, they sought to establish a Christian canon of sacred books. Christians had continued to use the scriptures of Judaism because they believed

these writings prepared for and foreshadowed the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. But they wished to determine which writings proclaiming the meaning of Jesus and his life, death, and Resurrection held authority for believers. So the Christian community also measured or tested its sacred books, using three major, interconnected criteria: orthodox content, apostolic origin, and use in the churches. The first criterion considered whether a book was consistent with essential, normative teaching of the Christian churches. Second, Christians tested material to determine if the book’s essential content could be traced back to one or more of the first apostles, or at least proved to be consistent with their message. Third, the Christian community inquired whether the material in question was regularly being used for teaching and worship in the churches.

One list of Christian scriptures named all twenty-seven books that currently form the New Testament canon possibly as early as 200 CE. One manuscript of the Bible from the 300s contains the New Testament as it currently appears, but two others from about the same time still include several other writings. An Easter letter of Bishop Athanasius from 367 CE seems to have been decisive; the bishop of Alexandria in Egypt called the twenty-seven books that eventually formed the New Testament canon “springs of salvation,” adding the caution, “Let no one add to these or take anything away from them.” By the early 400s CE, Christians had generally agreed upon the New Testament canon. They chose only four of more than fifty gospels known to have been written, along with a number of letters and other books. Luther questioned the inclusion of four New Testament books and placed them at the end of his translation, but today the Christian canon of the New Testament is identical for Catholics and Protestants (see earlier listing).

As with scriptures of the Old Testament period, New Testament writings that do not meet one or more of the key criteria are classified

as apocryphal books. Examples of New Testament apocrypha are the *Gospel of Thomas*, a letter of Barnabas, letters of Clement, and the *Shepherd of Hermas*. As with Old Testament apocrypha,

though these works are not part of the biblical canon, they frequently offer valuable information and insight that helps Christians understand and interpret the canonical New Testament.

FROM THE APOCRYPHAL *INFANCY GOSPEL OF THOMAS*, CA. 140–170 CE

The following excerpt is an example of material that would not be considered part of the New Testament canon because it does not reflect authentic Christian faith about Jesus.

When the boy Jesus was about five years old, he was playing in a rushing stream. He was gathering the flowing waters into ponds . . . and he ordered these things with a single word. After he made clay, he molded twelve sparrows from it. It was the Sabbath when he did these things, and there were many other children playing with him.

Then, a certain Jew saw what Jesus was doing while playing on the Sabbath. Immediately he went and reported to Jesus' father, Joseph, "Look, your child is in the stream and took clay

and formed birds out of it, and so has profaned the Sabbath."

And Joseph went there and when he saw Jesus he shouted, "Why are you doing these things that are not permitted on the Sabbath?" Jesus, however, clapped his hands and shouted to the sparrows, "Go, fly, and remember me now that you are alive." And the sparrows flew off, shrieking.

Next, Jesus was going through the village and a running child bumped his shoulder. Becoming angry, Jesus said to him, "You will not continue your journey." Immediately, the child fell dead.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. Many people today have no idea what is in the Bible. How would you describe this book and its contents to someone who has never opened a Bible?
2. Summarize major steps in the formation of a book of the Bible. Can you think of any other writings that might have been formed in a similar way?
3. Explain the meaning of canon in general. How did the Jewish and Christian faith communities decide which sacred scriptures would be included in their Bibles?
4. How does the content of the Hebrew canon differ from that of the Greek canon? Explain how this difference affects the content of Christian Bibles.
5. What are the apocryphal books, and how are they distinguished from canonical books?
6. Based on the excerpt from the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* on p. 17, discuss why early Christians would have classified it as apocryphal. Compare and contrast this account with Luke's story of the twelve-year-old Jesus in the temple, Luke 2:41–52.