

THE BIBLE UNPACKED

What is the bible?

66 books: 39 New Testament, 27 Old Testament

The **Apocrypha**: (meaning 'hidden'). Never found in Hebrew scriptures, but accepted by Roman Catholics and some Anglicans. Their 'authority' debated since the Reformation.

The **Septuagint**: often shown as LXX (because of 70 translators). The Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures – 4th-century.

The **Vulgate**: Latin translation, much the work of St Jerome (347-420).

Targum – Aramaic renderings of the Hebrew scriptures, not usually written down

Pentateuch – First five books: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy – the 'Books of Moses'

How was it written?

Oral tradition for a long time. Earliest form of writing – **cuneiform**. Parchments introduced by Phoenician gave rise to **scrolls**. Then **codex** – roughly our book format.

Oldest text believed to be Judges chapter 5 – 10th- or 11th- century BC.

OT mostly written in Hebrew, though a few sections in Aramaic.

NT all composed in Greek. When NT writers quote the OT, they normally cite the Septuagint

First translation of any part of the bible in English attributed to the Venerable Bede, c.735

Who decided what was included (or excluded)?

Known as the 'canon' of scripture.

The Hebrew bible existed in its present form in texts known as the **Mishnah**, end of 2nd century BC. Three processes overlapped: the writing, the collecting of texts and sayings, and the treating of them as scripture. The Pentateuch as the most important, as they contained the law of Moses.

Some controversy over inclusion of Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Esther, because they don't specifically mention YHWH. Some doubt over Daniel and Ecclesiasticus.

New Testament: How the canon came to be fixed not entirely clear. Authority of writer or source important. Athanasius letter to his clergy in 397 seems to mark the accepted list. Some of the eastern churches did not accept 2 and 3 John until the sixth century.

The bible's different types of writing

History, prophecy, myth, teaching, poetry, song, wisdom.

Myth – Something that embodies a deep truth; or 'truths' not 'truth'. **Aetiologies** – explanation of origins (eg Tower of Babel; Lot's wife and pillar of salt). Similar stories to Noah's flood found in other cultures, eg the **Epic of Gilgamesh**.

Understanding context and circumstances important to our understanding, and to how we treat each writing.

Genesis and the books of the Pentateuch

Genesis 1 v Genesis 2. Identification of four distinct strands found throughout the Pentateuch, known as J (Jahwist), E (Elohim), P (Priestly), D (Deuteronomy).

The 'Inspired Word of God'?

Bowker: We do not know what anyone originally spoke or wrote. The written text has come down with many variations. "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching.." (1 Tim. 3: 16) could equally be "Every scripture inspired by God is useful for teaching..."

Romans 5: 12 could be translated in eleven different ways.

Problems of the conquest of Canaan, Saul destroying the Amalekites, Psalm 137 – throwing children on the rocks, Abraham being instructed to slay Isaac. Ways of interpretation.

The Gospels – Why four?

Matthew, Mark and Luke – 'Synoptics.' The Synoptic theory that Mark was first to be written, and that Matthew and Luke largely copied him. They have their own extra material – M and L, and they draw from another source that Mark doesn't have – Q. John's gospel mainly comes from a different source.

The '**Matthean exception**' – shows some development in the teaching about divorce?

The four books all carried authority, being named after the apostles. A compromise to retain all four – no contender had a higher claim than another.

How should we use the bible today – and how *do* people use it?

Inescapable that the bible has been used to press political and national ambitions: eg racial supremacy. It has been used both as an instrument of oppression and liberation.

Bible is open to the most diverse readings – 'the plasticity and fruitfulness of biblical texts.'

'Darker' parts of the bible often justified 'without reference to the greater purpose of God in creation of holiness and love.'

Personal reading should complement our reading/hearing in church. Important to share with other people, so that it isn't just a matter of private opinion.

"We read the bible in order to encounter the Word of God in the words of God, and to be made a holy people for the worship of God and the service of the world." (Bowker)