

THE FORMATION OF THE CHRISTIAN BIBLE

THE TWO TESTAMENTS

No book has had a greater impact on the world than the Bible. We think of it as a single book, but in fact it is a collection of many different writings composed over a long period of time. In particular, there is an important division between the Old Testament, or Hebrew Bible, that Christians have inherited from the Jews, and the New Testament, written to record the revelation of God in Christ. There is some disagreement about how many books there are in the Old Testament, but this should

not bother us unduly. The ancient Israelites sometimes combined what to us are thirty-nine books in a way that left only twenty-four of them, but the text itself is the same. It is how they are arranged that is different, with 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles being counted as one each, as are Ezra and Nehemiah. The twelve 'minor' prophets (Hosea to Malachi) may also be regarded as a single book, thus reducing the number quite considerably, but without changing the actual text.

More significantly, the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches add books to the Old Testament that are not in the Hebrew Bible. These extra books were attached by Jews to the Greek translations used by the early Christians. Protestants do not accept them as part of the Old Testament but call them Apocrypha, a word that originally meant 'hidden' but that is now used to indicate that they are not regarded as divinely inspired. Nowadays most people, including many Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox scholars, agree that these books should not be used to teach Christian doctrine, even if most of what they say is unobjectionable. Protestants do not normally include them in their Bibles, but when they do, they section them off from the Old Testament and do not use them in their preaching or teaching ministry. In this, they are following the example of the early Church which did not write commentaries or preach sermons on them, even though they were included in their biblical manuscripts.

The Hebrew Bible is basically the same as the Christian Old Testament (minus the Apocrypha), but

it is subdivided into three sections in a way that our Old Testament is not. The first of these sections is the Torah (Law) which consists of the five books from Genesis to Deuteronomy, collectively known as the Pentateuch and traditionally ascribed to Moses as their author. The second is the Prophets, which includes the historical books from Joshua to 2 Kings (except Ruth), the three 'major' prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel) and the twelve 'minor' ones (Hosea to Malachi). The third section is called the Writings and includes the Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Song of Songs (Solomon), Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah and 1-2 Chronicles, usually in that order. The Christian Bible follows Hebrew tradition as far as the Torah is concerned, but it combines the Prophets and the Writings in the way that the ancient Greek translations did, and uses the Greek names (or translations of them) as the titles of individual books. This difference is noticeable but it has no theological significance. It may occasionally be remarked on, particularly in the case of a book like Daniel, which Christians place among the Prophets, but it seldom affects the way it is interpreted.

In the New Testament, the Law and Prophets are mentioned together, probably because they were regarded as a single collection of holy Scriptures. The Writings are not distinguished as a group and are less often cited, with the exception of the Psalter, which is quoted more often than any other Old Testament book. What we know is that the Writings were in existence in the time of Jesus and that almost all of

them were recognised as sacred. Among Jews there were some lingering doubts about Ecclesiastes and Esther, but although neither is referred to in the New Testament, both are (and have always been) included in the Hebrew Bible.

Who wrote the Old Testament books and how they came to be collected together is unknown. It is traditionally understood that Moses, the great lawgiver of Israel, contributed to the Pentateuch and that David wrote at least some of the Psalms traditionally ascribed to him, but the New Testament habit of referring to the Pentateuch as 'Moses' and the Psalms as 'David' does not mean that they were the authors in the modern sense of the word. Moses and David were archetypal figures around whom the Torah and the Psalter clustered, but many scholars believe that they did not write them (or most of them) themselves. As for the prophets, they normally delivered their messages orally. What they said was later written down and edited, but who did that is now unknown.

What we can say is that the Torah was recognised as sacred before the Prophets or the Writings were accorded a similar status. We know this because the Samaritans accepted it (and nothing else) as their Scriptures, which suggests that it was already recognised as such when they split off from the main Israelite community at Jerusalem. When that happened is uncertain, though it was probably sometime before 500 BC at the latest. Who gave the Torah its special status, a process known as 'canonisation', is unknown, but it was probably the

priests and scribes of the Jerusalem Temple, because there was nobody else in the Jewish world who could command the required degree of authority. As to how they operated or came to decisions regarding canonicity, we can only speculate. What we do know is that there was a remarkable degree of unanimity among them; the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran in 1947 has confirmed this. Those scrolls were written in the time of Jesus or earlier, and many of them are almost identical to the surviving synagogue manuscripts, the oldest of which date from about a thousand years later and are the standard Hebrew texts used by both Jews and Christians today. We can therefore say with confidence that our Old Testament goes back to pre-Christian times and was inherited by Christians in essentially its present form.

In contrast to the Old Testament, the New Testament was completed within a generation or two of the events it describes and some of its authors are known to us from events recorded in the Gospels and Acts – the Apostle Paul, for example, as well as Luke and possibly Mark. The identity of ‘John’ is less certain, because we do not know whether the five books ascribed to him were all written by the same person, or by different people with the same (very common) name. Whether the Gospel traditionally ascribed to Matthew was written by the apostle of that name is uncertain, and the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews is unknown, but they belonged to the relatively small circle of Jesus’ disciples and would have been known to the Apostles. Certainly, their writings were accepted as authentically ‘apostolic’ in the sense that they

faithfully conveyed apostolic teaching, and nobody ever questioned that. For centuries, Matthew was thought to have been the first Gospel to have been written, which is why it comes first in the New Testament today, and it was believed that Mark and Luke copied from him, though modern research has shown that matters are more complicated than that. Quite how the Gospels are related to each other remains controversial, but related they undoubtedly are, and despite their differences, they all tell the same story. Doubts about the authorship of some of the Epistles have been expressed from time to time, but they have not succeeded in overturning the Church's traditional judgment, and the twenty-seven books that make up our New Testament have long been accepted as Holy Scripture by virtually all Christians everywhere.

THE CHRISTIAN BIBLE

The Christian Church accepts the Hebrew Bible but interprets it in the light of the revelation of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. In practice, this means that the Church believes that many of the rites and ceremonies, including the numerous food laws, have been made redundant because their original purpose has been fulfilled in the life and work of Christ. They remain in the Bible, partly because they bear witness to God's revelation of himself to ancient Israel and partly because they can now be applied in a spiritual, if not in a literal sense. Israel was called to be different from

the surrounding nations, and Christians are also set apart from others, though not in the same physical way. For us, holiness is not a matter of performing (or not performing) certain ritual acts, but of thinking in a way that will lead us to live according to principles that the world around us does not accept or even understand.

This way of reading the Old Testament is now standard among Christians, but that has not always been the case. Periodic attempts to discredit and abandon it have been made at least since the second century, when a preacher called Marcion, who taught at Rome sometime around the years AD 140–50, dismissed the Hebrew texts as the revelation of an inferior deity. He then expurgated the New Testament to remove all trace of the Old, which left him with little more than Luke–Acts. But as his critics were quick to point out, even those books were far too ‘Jewish’ for Marcion’s liking. Today there is little sign of such radical criticism, but there is still a tendency among Christians to prefer the New Testament to the Old, and to regard the Hebrew Bible as somehow inferior to it.

Christians do not always realise it, but ignoring the Old Testament undermines our appreciation of the New. The message of Jesus was built on the foundation of the Hebrew Bible and cannot be understood apart from it. If the sacred character of the Old Testament is disregarded and it is treated as something less than the Word of God, the plausibility of the New Testament is also called into question. Jesus taught his disciples that he was the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets, but if their message is undervalued, how can anyone have

confidence in his teaching? To follow Jesus is to hear God speaking in the Old Testament as well as in the New, because neither is complete without the other. Indeed, it is not too much to say that the history of biblical interpretation can be written with this as its underlying theme – how to read both Testaments as the one Word of God, in which the promises that he made to Israel were fulfilled in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

People sometimes ask whether more books can be added to the Bible, but the answer to that must be no. For example, if an unknown letter of the apostle Paul were to be discovered today, it would not be added to the New Testament because it would be almost impossible to authenticate it or to get everyone to agree that it was genuine. Canonicity is not just a matter of authorship but of reception and use in the church. A book discovered now would not fulfil this important condition. Heretics in ancient times sometimes claimed to possess books that the church had suppressed, but there is no evidence of that. Some of these books, like the so-called Gospel of Thomas, have been discovered in modern times but they are greatly inferior to the canonical Gospels and probably much later in date. They present no challenge to the New Testament as we have it and only confirm the soundness of the early church's judgment as to what was authentically apostolic and what was not.

The same must be said about other writings that claim to be divine revelations in the biblical tradition. The Muslim Qu'ran, for example, is said to be the final

phase of a revelation that began with the Torah and the Injil (Gospel), and the Book of Mormon is supposed to be Jesus Christ's word to his 'latter-day saints', but no Christian church accepts them as Scripture. The Christian view is stated quite clearly in Hebrews 1:1, where the writer tells us that, while the Old Testament was a partial revelation given by God at different times and in different ways, his final and complete self-disclosure has come 'in these last days' in his Son. There is no need to look any further.

If additions to the Bible are now impossible, what about subtractions? The Protestant Reformers excluded the Apocrypha (on good grounds, like many in the early church), so the disappearance of other books is not inconceivable. Martin Luther disliked James because he thought it did not preach justification by faith alone, but he did not drop it from the canon. More recently, there has been talk of a 'canon within the canon', which would grant spiritual authority to some books but not to others. But, who decides which books should be retained and which not? Can books that have proved their worth for centuries simply be discarded? Any proposed change of that kind would be opposed by large sections of the church and would never gain widespread acceptance. The fact is that the biblical canon cannot now be altered, and its would-be interpreters must accept it as it is, as the Church has always done.