

Shape & Structure

The formation of the Christian Bible

THE LIVING LIBRARY

Introduction

'The Bible' (lit. 'the Book') is a collection of writings that, for many Christians, are a written record of God's self-revelation within time and space, the basis of truth and faith. They regard the writings as living words, not only because they are 'God-breathed' (2 Tim 3:16), but also because they have brought life-changing experience to millions down through the centuries.

When we hold a Bible in our hands it is as a single volume. It is often leather-bound, semi-yapp with gold edges. It doesn't even look and feel like most books we use in our everyday life. Its physical appearance can create an aura that inhibits people discovering its reality. The Bible is not a 'magic' book; we must not approach it with a super-spiritual attitude. It is, for many, a book of power and life; a reality most clearly discovered when we approach it humbly, but with our eyes wide open to its true nature.

Again, the fact that we use the Bible as a single bound volume leads us to forget that it is not a book but in fact a whole library. Written over hundreds of years, with many different authors, in numerous styles and exploring every possible subject.

Divided yet united

Within the Christian community it is traditionally presented as 66 books, divided into two main sections; 39 in the first half and 27 in the second. We shall see that the way they are arranged, especially in the first section, is unhelpful and even inhibiting. The answer to the question, 'How many books are there in the Bible?' becomes an interesting and open question!

It has become unquestioned that the first section of this collection is referred to as the 'Old Testament'. Those writings are never referred to in this way in the New Testament; there they are spoken of simply as 'the scriptures'. In popular thought to call something 'old' is to disparage it, which is just the attitude many have to the Hebrew Scriptures.¹ These writings are not 'old', but rather 'foundational'. We will never understand the full wonder of the new covenant until we have discovered the profound nature of the original one that it fulfils.

In this section of the course we will develop the skills and insights to explore the second section of this living library.

¹ For this reason a number of scholars prefer to speak in terms of 'First and Second Testaments' when speaking of our Christian Bible. See John Goldingay, *Models for Scripture* (Grand Rapids/Carlisle: Eerdmans/Paternoster, 1994), 2, n. 7. The term 'Hebrew Scriptures' is often used of the OT in Workshop. However, for scholars, this has a technical meaning: the TaNaKh read in Hebrew (and Aramaic).



THE NEW TESTAMENT WRITINGS

Documents of the new era

Passing from the Hebrew Scriptures to move among the documents of the New Testament, we are soon aware that we are travellers in a new era. Here is God's new covenant revealed in the written record of the words and works of Jesus the Messiah and his followers. Everything is new and yet the transition from the Hebrew Bible to these new documents and the events they record is completely natural, and presupposed in everything. Jesus the Messiah is the one in whom all the hopes and promises of the Hebrew Scriptures are fulfilled.

There is a language change. The Hebrew, and occasional Aramaic, of the Jewish Scriptures gives way to *koine* Greek, the lingua franca of the Mediterranean world of the New Testament day. This is interesting when we realise that Aramaic was the mother tongue of Jesus and his disciples, but understandable when we realise that it was *koine* Greek that united the babble of tongues and enabled communication in the Roman empire. However, the *koine* Greek of the New Testament has a strong Hebrew accent.

The 27 books of the New Testament present us with an interesting collection:

- They come from the pens of more than nine different authors;
- Some are very short; in fact the whole of the New Testament is only one third the length of the Hebrew Scriptures;
- They span little more than 50 years in time (c. 45-100 CE), yet they contain allusions to events that cover the whole first century CE;
- They are not in chronological order, such a concept is foreign to the ancient oriental mind; any exact chronological reconstruction of the New Testament is impossible;
- They are not dated directly and few of them contain enough information to fix their dates with accuracy;
- An attempt at placing them in chronological order would probably leave us with James (possibly 1 Thessalonians) first and 2 Peter concluding the list. However, the 'spiritual' logic of the order is exact:
 - **Matthew**: stressing Jesus' fulfilment of the Hebrew covenant, thus binding the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament together;
 - **Revelation**: setting out the ultimate consummation of God's purposes in salvation history against the landscape of eternity.

The traditional structure of the New Testament is simple and probably impossible to improve upon:



- 4 Gospels: The first three gospels share striking similarities and thus are collectively known as the Synoptic Gospels. They appear to be like biographies in that they give different viewpoints of the life and work of Jesus. In fact the scholarly consensus is that they share many features with Graeco-Roman biographies of the time. John's gospel is very different in that Jesus is no longer presented as speaking in parables and short, pithy sayings as in the Synoptics.
- 1 History (Theological): A companion volume to the third gospel, Acts takes the story of the church beyond the death and resurrection of Jesus into the heart of the world of its day. Again it is a prophetic history and an important contribution to salvation history early in the new covenant era.
- 19 Letters: These form the bulk of the New Testament material and are a living record of the early Christian community and their relationship with apostolic leadership. Here we see the shaping of foundational theological ideas and wrestling with their implications in terms of lifestyle within a hostile pagan environment. The letters at times contain both pain and anguish and yet they are saturated with the joy and excitement of being the new covenant people of God.
- 2 Treatises (Hebrews and 1 John): Both of these are usually regarded as letters but Hebrews refers to itself as a 'word of exhortation' (Heb 13:22) and this is the same phrase as is used of Paul's sermon in Acts 13:15. It is better, therefore, to regard Hebrews as a sermon or homily. 1 John, like Hebrews, does not have the usual letter opening, nevertheless, the author addresses the recipients as 'children' or 'beloved' and refers frequently to writing and so has many of the characteristics of a letter. It is probably best categorised as a hybrid letter-treatise or homily in the form of a letter.
- 1 Apocalypse: The book of Revelation consists of visions and images to inspire the suffering church towards its destiny. It includes the letter form as part of its structure as the first three chapters consist primarily of John's letter to seven churches. In fact Revelation combines three genres: apocalypse, letter and prophecy.

Sources and influences

It is very important to examine the New Testament books in terms of the roots and sources from which they sprang. It helps to bring a new perspective to the way we look at the collection of writings as a whole and the individual documents in particular.



□ The 'Peter' orbit

This collection of documents was not all written by Peter but his personality was an important stimulus to the writing.

- **Mark** is very likely to have been the first Gospel to be written. There are clear statements from the early church fathers (e.g. Papius c. 115 CE) that Mark wrote down with great accuracy the teaching of Jesus based on the preaching of Peter. Reading the Gospel there is a great sense of immediacy and many little eyewitness reports that suggest you are listening to someone who was there.
- **1 and 2 Peter** were written to churches under the apostle's care. Their personal tone is penned against a background of growing persecution and heresy. In the first letter you can hear the words of Jesus behind so much of what Peter says and the examples he uses. He brings directness and authority (e.g. 34 imperatives!), yet he speaks from the heart. The watchword is 'hope through suffering'. Notice his commitment to non-violence. The second letter² is more laboured and awkward than the first; persecution has given way to heresy. It stresses 'knowing' rightly some 16 times.
- **Jude** is a little letter that appears to have strongly influenced 2 Peter; cf. vv. 17-18 with 2 Pet 3:3, words attributed to 'the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ'. Jude was the brother of James (v. 1) and so very likely the half-brother of Jesus (cf. Mark 8:3). Heresy is bringing in the error of making 'licence out of liberty'; no fixed standards, idle intellectual speculation with fancy oratory.

□ The 'Paul' orbit

The 'apostle to the Gentiles' has left a huge imprint upon the shape of the New Testament, as he clearly did on large sections of the early church. Not only were his own writings, but also those close to him, a vital insight into the nature of the new covenant.

- **Luke–Acts** is a single work in two volumes. The traditional view is that their author was the Greek-speaking Gentile physician Luke, who became the close companion of Paul after they met at Troas (c. 51 CE). He became the church's first great historian and apologist. His narrative spans from the conception of Jesus to Paul's imprisonment in

² There are strong arguments that Peter did not actually write the second letter but that it came out of a circle closely linked with him and that the readers would have recognised the style and true source, though it had a close connection with him; see Richard J. Bauckham, *2 Peter and Jude* (Word Biblical Commentaries; Dallas: Word, 1983).



Rome. According to the traditional view, his research and historical detail is meticulous, often including personal eyewitness accounts seen in the 'we' passages. His story reflects his close relationship with Paul but it brings an independent style and in both Luke³ and Acts uniquely captures the breadth of the gospel of the kingdom and the new covenant as it impacts Jew and Gentile alike. His emphasis on the Holy Spirit, joy, women, the poor and prayer are not only hallmarks of his writing but of the message itself. Being the only Gentile writer in the New Testament his perspectives are significant and powerful. The traditional view is, however, questioned by many scholars today. The 'we' passages are seen as either a literary fiction or an eyewitness source incorporated into Acts. The main problem for the traditional view is that Luke portrays a somewhat different picture of Paul than emerges from Paul's own letters and, in particular, his portrayal of the apostolic council in Acts 15 is very difficult to reconcile with Paul's description of the event in Galatians 2.

- **Paul's letters** are such a distinctive influence upon the shape and character of the New Testament. These 13 letters,⁴ to churches and individuals, are born out of the demands of life and give a rare insight into the life of the early church and the development of its theology. Some were written as he travelled (Galatians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Romans), others from his prison cell (Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians). Most were to churches but some were to individuals from whom he was separated by imprisonment (Philemon). The sovereignty of God to choose this rabbinic scholar to pioneer the church among the Gentiles is clear in the content of all the letters. The importance of his imprisonment to give us a written record of his teaching is also obvious.
- **Hebrews** was certainly not written by Paul but clearly comes from someone who knew him. The author knew Timothy (13:23) and was a Greek scholar with a philosophical cast of mind. The Greek in the letter is some of the best in the New Testament. The writer was a Jew but uses the LXX for the frequent biblical quotations. Suggested authors are Barnabas, even Priscilla, but the most widely favoured is Apollos – we will never be certain. It has been insightfully said that 'while the authorship is uncertain the inspiration is indisputable'. A key theme is 'better'; a better messenger (son), apostle, priest, covenant, sacrifice,

³ The largest book in the New Testament.

⁴ Only seven letters command universal acceptance among scholars as being from Paul. Most scholars no longer believe that Paul wrote the Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy, Titus) in their present form, though some believe they contain original material written by Paul but edited and supplemented for the author's purpose. The majority of scholars also believe Ephesians was not written by Paul. Opinion is divided on the other two disputed letters: 2 Thessalonians and Colossians.



way. The author uses Plato's image of 'shadow' and 'reality', the shadow of the old covenant becomes reality through Jesus. The book contains really important statements about both the humanity and deity of the incarnation of Jesus.

□ **The 'John' source**

While John is one of the disciples of Jesus the writings that flow from his source are dated at the very close of the New Testament era. He combines a lifetime of the most intimate involvement with the life and person of Jesus and the growth of the church, with a lifetime of deep reflection upon the truths of the Christian message. This 'John', however, is most likely not John the son of Zebedee, one of the Twelve, but another disciple of Jesus – John 'the Elder'.⁵

- **Gospel and Letters** were most probably written in Ephesus when John was an old man. The Gospel presents us with a unique perspective on Jesus' ministry. He would have expected his readers to be familiar with some, if not all, the Synoptic Gospels and so runs his own commentary on important issues alongside the unfolding narrative. He brings in important historical detail, puts John the Baptist's relationship with Jesus into perspective; brings fresh inflections into familiar stories (e.g. Mary and Martha). At about the same time as he wrote the Gospel he wrote three pastoral letters. The same spirit that runs through the Gospel is found in the letters. Here is someone captivated by the paradox of the simplicity and complexity of truth. He uses the words 'life', 'love' and 'light' like a child, yet as a spiritual father he uses them with a sense of awe. In his day the spectre of heresy is rising and he attacks it ruthlessly.
- **Revelation** stands in such striking contrast to the Gospel and Letters that many doubt the writer of these documents had anything to do with the authorship of this apocalyptic work.⁶ Nevertheless, the author appears thoroughly familiar with the material contained in these Johannine works and so the book is rightly included as part of the Johannine strand in the New Testament. John records his visions as an eyewitness. The text is saturated with Hebrew imagery with over 400 allusions to the Hebrew Scriptures. The series of visions are clear units of revelation with their central focus on the victorious person of Christ and the church triumphant through him, both in the present and ultimately.

⁵ See Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2006), 412-37.

⁶ Many believe that Revelation is the work of a prophet called John, but nothing to do with either the apostle John or John the Elder.



□ The 'Hebrew' influence

The two remaining documents are the most strongly Jewish of all the New Testament writings and remind us of the essential links between the Hebrew scriptures and the new covenant texts.

- **James** may well be the earliest of the New Testament documents (c. 45-50 CE), the work of the half-brother of Jesus, leader of the Jerusalem church, executed by Herod c. 62 CE. His wisdom, and the esteem in which he was held, is seen in the Council of Jerusalem (cf. Acts 15:13-21); and his saintliness became a legend among both Christians and Jews. He writes at a time when the Christians are still worshipping in the synagogue and the church is not yet fully independent of Judaism (cf. Jas 2:2). Listening carefully you can hear the echo of Jesus' voice throughout the letter. The style emphasises ethics, draws frequent illustrations from the Hebrew Scriptures and is thoroughly Hebraic in style. He examines what really demonstrates true religion, true faith and true wisdom.
- **Matthew**⁷ the apostle, we are told by Papius (c. 100 CE), wrote the sayings of Jesus in Aramaic. Whether the same person wrote the Gospel we now have is far from certain. It is not a Greek translation from Aramaic, and why should a personal companion of Jesus use almost the whole of Mark's Gospel (606 of the 661 verses) who was not even one of the Twelve? Whatever the actual origin of the present Gospel it is probably very closely linked to Matthew's originals and dates from c. 70-80 CE. It is thoroughly Jewish; ideally suited for a church still closely linked to Judaism. Yet Jesus is presented to us in universal perspective, his message is to 'go into all the world', a commentary on the essence of the final clause of God's promise to Abraham, 'by you shall all the people of the earth bless themselves'. Matthew places Jesus' teaching in five clear blocks (chapters 5-7; 10; 13; 18; 23-25); paralleling the five books of Moses, here is the new Torah. Jesus is shown fulfilling the 'Law and the Prophets', he is heralded the 'Son of David' (8 times) and we see him as the fulfilment of Hebrew prophecy.

QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think that parts of the New Testament are something of a closed book for some Christians? What can be done to open them?
2. Which book of the New Testament do you find most difficult to read and enjoy, and which do you enjoy most? What do you think accounts for the difference?

⁷ Often called the 'perfect gospel', due to its carefully honed structure.



READING AND RESOURCES

Delbert Burkett, *An Introduction to the New Testament and the Origins of Christianity* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002).

Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* (Revised edition; London: SCM, 1999).

David Wenham & Steve Walton, *Exploring the New Testament: The Gospels and Acts* (London: SPCK, 2001).

Howard Marshall, Stephen Travis & Ian Paul, *Exploring the New Testament: The Letters and Revelation* (London: SPCK, 2002).

