

What is the Bible?

Nik Howarth 5th May 2019

30 mins, three sections of 10 mins, could do a PhD on each section. Each section has been discussed for over a thousand years.

What does the Bible consist of?

Easy answer:

66 books, divided into two sections, that written before Jesus and those written afterwards, Old and New Testaments.

However that is completely untrue. The Bible that you have that is like that is a highly edited version produced by somebody who wants it that way.

What it is a selection of documents, made up from thousands of bits of lost and reconstructed "paper". There is no clear agreement on the formulation of most of the documents, and no clear agreement on which documents are in and which are out.

The New Testament is written in ancient Koine Greek.

The Old Testament is written in Hebrew and Aramaic.

The most complete, oldest, and the scriptures that Jesus used are written in Greek, not Hebrew. It is a translation of the Hebrew into Greek done in Alexandria in Egypt 3-2 BCE: called the Septuagint.

The first Bible that was produced and looks something like we would recognise was a translation of the Greek and Hebrew into Latin.

What happened was this.

After Jesus the Jewish community was scattered all over the world and had loads of old scrolls in different places that they used as their scriptures, largely being what the early church used as the Old Testament.

Those who became Christians collected the written and oral accounts from the existing Christian witnesses and wrote up accounts of Jesus, lots of them. Paul's letters were collected, there were different versions of copies. Letters of other apostles were collected. Other accounts and stories were collected.

Three hundred years later just about every church and area had its own collection of scriptures. Over a period of about 20 years the church leaders met and decided which scriptures were agreed and could be read in church services. They produced three lists:

Old Jewish books that everyone agreed were OK.

Old Jewish books that they agreed to disagree over, some churches had some in, some did not.

Recent (for them) Christian writings that were accepted.

The rest of the thousands of books were not accepted to be read in church, i.e., not on the list (canon) .

So we ended up with a Bible that was OT, Apocrypha, and NT.

So far so good, but the copies got lost over the next thousand years: so the names of the works that made up the Bible were agreed, but the early copies got lost.

And the non Christian Jews continued to spread everywhere and further mix up their texts.

Eventually, the Jews sorted their problem out. They did a sort of audit of available material and produced an agreed Hebrew text of 24 of their scriptures; this is known as the Masoretic text. It took them about 300 years and was done between 7th to 10 centuries CE! The other of their scriptures are taken from the Septuagint and other sources (some say Christian and Latin). So, don't get thinking that the OT in your Bible is the old Hebrew script dating back to the Daniel. It is not. It is more recent than the NT!

The Church developed with lots of copies and versions. We have old fragments going back to possibly the 1st century, some to the 2nd, and the less you go back the more bits we have. But we have very few complete copies of early documents, such as a whole Gospel.

Two we do have are Codex Sinaiticus dating back to 4th century, named because it was discovered in St Catherine's monastery in 19th Century, and Codex Vaticanus of a similar period but known of for much longer.

However these two are not exactly the same!

It is not an exaggeration to say that the Bible is a million bits of documents scattered all over the world that academics put together. They don't agree on what goes in, what comes out, and which books to use. As late as 16th Century people were trying to take the Epistle of James and Revelation out of the NT. Today some are trying to put The Gospel of Thomas in. There has never been agreement over what makes up the OT.

So why trust it?!

The problem, as outlined above, looks immense, but, there are some remarkable conditions. Firstly the Jewish oral tradition was very strict. Secondly the hand-written documentation that was passed down over the centuries was also very strict. Considering the time scales and the geographical distribution the degree of consistency of discovered text is quite remarkable. Thirdly, there are copies of very ancient texts in other languages such as Coptic and ancient Syrian which support the texts we have.

Whereas it is true to say that there are millions of versions of the texts, nearly all the differences are very minor, being letter changes, variation of names and places, etc. The core stories and theological content is not altered by any of the changes.

We can say that with such a large amount of material, it is 99% constant, and the 1% does not alter the teaching.

Furthermore, in the last 100 years, particularly from the last half of the 20th C there has been incredible advancement in study of these parchments from carbon dating to textural criticism. This is not the place to discuss these methods, but let's just say that some very aggressive, both pro and anti, scholars have been comparing text with text for a long time and arguing over minutia. Due to modern travel and communications it has been much easier to collect material together to compare it. The result is that it is now generally accepted that the modern English text that we have are a very good reconstruction and reflect the original texts.

The other issue is archeology.

There have been many recent discoveries of new bits of information. This is still happening today. This new information always seems to fit with supporting the accuracy of the modern texts.

Nag Hammadi

Any idea that the Gospels were constructed in Rome to reflect the legend of Jesus etc has been completely destroyed. One of the most remarkable discoveries was in 1945 in Egypt near a village called Nag Hammadi in 1945. Here 52 works were discovered that had been there since probably 367CE. They contain stories about a man named Jesus, who had 12 disciples, who had followers called Mary Magdalene, and he was crucified by a Roman Governor called Piolet in Jerusalem.etc.

This completely destroys any idea that the Gospels are fabrications and is clear historical evidence of Jesus outside of the Bible. (There are two other references to Jesus outside of the Bible, Josephus and Tacitus).

Dead Sea Scrolls

From 1946 through to 1956 similar type discoveries were made in the caves near Qumran near the Dead Sea. These were old parchments dating from a few hundred years before Jesus to a hundred years after. Many OT books were there, including a complete version of Isaiah and many Psalms. These discoveries support the accuracy of the modern versions, in one case, for example, clarifying a problem of translation of Psalm 22.

So, despite the problem of reconstructing stories and texts that go back maybe as much as 6000 years, the internal consistency of today's Bible is truly remarkable.

There is the difference of opinion as to what is Canonical and what is not. But that is a human problem, do you wish to read Ecclesiasticus as you would Isaiah, or the Shepherd of Hermes as you do Revelation? That is a historical issue. The accuracy of the text is another issue, and that is reliable.

The texts we have today are the most accurate ever, reflecting the original writings.

So what do we do with it?

This is more contentious than any of the above.

It is a source of ancient material that can be useful for guiding our lives and we must adapt it to today's thinking.

It is the unerring word of God and must be taken totally literally on face value.

It is a special anointed text used preferentially by the Holy Spirit.

It reflects God's values and heart.

It reflects the ancient values of past civilizations.

The danger is that it becomes a code, clever people can understand it and use it to control others.

Father Son and Holy Bible.

It replaces Jesus as our standard.

It promotes and reveals Jesus.

My view can best be summed up by saying it is the light that the Holy Spirit shines on Jesus.