

Making Sense of the Bible*

At Trinity we don't have any doctrinal statements we expect everyone to adhere to, but carry out our [mission](#), living into our vision through [practice](#). Yet we recognize that much of who we are and what we do as a church family is informed by scripture. So, it might be helpful to consider the following as our *starting* point:

How did the Bible come to be?

In an oral culture thousands of years ago, in a region of the world we call West Asia, now, the population was growing and defined societies were forming. This was taking place over many years and generations. As they grew in number they began to understand themselves as part of a group – a particular society – and they began to record their stories: their origins, their histories, their poetry, their stories. They did so as many cultures had done before them and as many have done since. They wrote tales both accurate and true, fictional and non-fictional, and they built their lives around the texts. Sometimes they would diverge from the teachings and guidance in those texts and they would have to be reminded to stay the course or to get back on course, and those stories and exhortations were included in their story as well. These texts guided them for generations. Then there was silence. No writing. No texts. No histories. Silence. 400 years later, a man who would become their leader – understood as being both man and God, came among them. Men and women followed him. They kept his stories alive by telling and retelling. Eventually, they started telling their stories to other people who began writing them down. At the same time there was a traveling preacher and teacher who would encourage the followers of their leader and who would write letters of instruction and exhortation to their communities (called churches). These letters became so instructive they were considered sacred, and long after this teacher/preacher's death his letters were also incorporated in a kind of "update" to their original texts that had been sacred and influential to the original group over a thousand years before.

Ironically, 1000 years later it appeared to many that the collection of writings – the Bible, it was called – had emerged as one book that essentially dropped from heaven. They called it "God's Word" ignorant of its development and its true authorship, and interestingly unable to read it for themselves since it was only written in Hebrew, Aramaic, Latin, and Greek and most of the world's population was illiterate.

In fact, it wasn't until well into the 1600s that reading the Bible was something a literate common man or woman could do.

So that means that for over ONE THOUSAND FIVE HUNDRED YEARS most followers of Jesus – and even the adherents of Judaism – our spiritual grandparent – only heard the scriptures occasionally and *read to them*.

So, what is this Bible we have? How was it viewed by the early Christians? What did they understand their "scriptures" to be?

Facts About the Bible/A Top Ten List:

1. The word "Bible" comes from the Greek word (*biblio*) for book. And the Bible is a book – but it is a certain kind of book: it is better considered an anthology. It is a collection of books and letters.
2. The Bible is not written by one author, nor is it even written on one topic. The authors did not work together.
3. There are at least 35 biblical authors. The authors wrote from different perspectives with different biases, and for different purposes over many, many years.
4. The first biblical book to be written is thought to be Genesis – likely written 1400 years before the Common Era. Which means the biblical texts that we hold sacred were written over a span of 1600 years.
5. The Bible didn't come together as we know it, fully, until about 300 years after the birth of Christ.

6. There are different Bible compilations: the Hebrew, the Roman Catholic, the Eastern Orthodox, the Protestant.
7. Some believe the Bible was written in a state of inspiration to the extent that the very words chosen and recorded are the very words of God.
8. We do not have any of the original biblical texts. Only copies.
9. Parts of the Bible are available in approximately 2,900 out of the 6,877 known languages, and that there are currently 554 languages with a complete Bible translation. The New Testament is available in 1,333 languages and many more have at least one book of the Bible available.
10. Christians around the world, regardless of denominational affiliation, consider the Bible a compilation of writings that are authoritative and insightful for those who follow Jesus.

What is the Old Testament?

Well, that's complicated: ask a Rabbi how many books are in the Bible and he will tell you 24. Ask a Catholic Priest how many books are in the Old Testament? He will tell you 46. Ask the Eastern Orthodox priest? 49 – or maybe 50. Ask a Protestant pastor? 39.

The Hebrew Bible is our Old Testament. They don't call it the OLD Testament. They just call it, "The Bible." Their 24 books are the same as our 39; they were just organized differently: for example, the two books of Samuel were originally one document; the two books of Kings and Chronicles are the same. Ezra and Nehemiah were one book. Long ago, the Jews combined all the "minor prophets" into a book called, "The Twelve." Boom. 24 books.

The Jews refer to the Bible as "The Bible" or as the TaNaKh, which is an acronym for the three sections: The Torah (the Law), the Nevi'im (the Prophets), and the Ketuvim (the Writings). This is both the order the authority these books have in the Jewish community as well as the order they were canonized and viewed as sacred writings. Notice the difference in the Protestant version of the Old Testament. We start with law, then history, then poetry and wisdom, then prophets.

What is the New Testament?

The sacred books for Jesus were the Old Testament, even though the discussion and development of books were under development at that time. Many Christians assume that by the end of the first century after Jesus, the New Testament would have been complete. But that's not true. During the first decades after the resurrection, the New Testament had a book and it was called Jesus. Jesus was the book - they were talking about Jesus. He was the word. And he was the focus. Jesus never wrote a book. Rather he preached and called the disciples to be his witnesses. So in the earliest decades of the Christian faith there were no documents, there were apostles preaching and teaching in Jesus' name.

The focus of the preaching was always on Jesus. So Paul's letters are the earliest documents of our New Testament because Paul was trying to gather people (churches) and he had to write letters to instruct people. And these letters had behind them his authority as an apostle. The letters were used instructionally. Paul probably didn't think he was writing scripture (as we think of it now). Shortly after Paul's death, they were likely copied and widely distributed. AD 96 Clement of Rome quotes from Paul's letter to the Corinthians, even though no New Testament exists at the time, noting that Paul is writing "in the Spirit." By the time of the writing of 2 Peter, Paul's letters became authoritative (2 Peter 3).

The Gospels. The sayings of Jesus carried more weight. One of the first quotes from any of the synoptic Gospels is found in the *Didache* (document from late first century or early second century). Clement pulled from Matthew or the source from which Matthew drew upon. Documents were being circulated and quoted, likely independently and coming to have authority. Around 130 AD, Papias (the bishop of Hierapolis), mentions the Gospels of Mark and Matthew and we learn that Mark was Peter's interpreter and the Gospel of Mark reflect Peter's recollection of events.

140 AD Marcion (from Rome) was the first to assemble a collection (Luke and ten of Paul's letters) that resembles what we have today. By the middle of the second century, Justin Martyr wrote descriptions of weekly Christian worship at the time, reflecting the use of readings from the Gospels and the prophets. By 170 AD, Tatian had compiled the *Diatessaron*, putting together the four Gospels and editing them along the way to create one account. Irenaeus was the first to use the term "New Testament" as letters were used authoritatively in the Church. Other letters were also being circulated.

In 367 AD Athanasius pulls together the books of the New Testament. In 397 AD, at a council in Carthage, Africa, the 27 books we have in our New Testament today were listed as canonical and to be read as divine scriptures.

Let's celebrate what the Bible is for us.

COMPILED – there is a diversity of voices in the Bible. This is frustrating and wonderful. It would be nice if there was some uniformity and we could just know, this is what God said. Do it. But we have multiple voices writing over multiple generations for multiple reasons. We hear the good, the bad, the ugly, the inspiring, the terrifying, the terrible, and the triumphant. For some reason, these books became part of our canon – they were trusted and affirmed for their use. The men who compiled them found them useful. And we do, too.

CONTEXTUAL – it was written by people in particular circumstances to address those circumstances or make sense of them. Why are there histories told from different perspectives? One says David disobeyed, another says God told David to do something. Was God confused? Or were there two writers telling the same story from different perspectives, for different purposes? To read it differently is to misunderstand the nature of ancient texts and especially the compiled and contextual nature of this particular text.

INSTRUCTIONAL – it was and is instructional. It has wisdom to share – both directly as well as implied. Its power is not found in its literality, but in the power of the words, the stories, the turns of phrase, the perspective of the teller. Its power is in the reading.

METAPHORICAL – some of the books are metaphorical and were not meant to be seen as "true stories" in the sense that they really happened. They were true because they imparted some wisdom in an artistic creative sense.

INSPIRATIONAL – they are inspirational for all people everywhere. There is something powerful about submitting oneself to the teachings of scripture.

So what do we do - where do we go from here?

We are invited into this story. We are invited into the messiness, into the mysteries, into the myriad ways in which the texts cause us to come face to face with – not just God – but with ourselves.

It is fair to say that the Bible is equal parts the story of us and the story of God.

So, we read the Bible, to see ourselves – our best selves and our worst selves. We read the Bible to see what humanity is capable of (both good and bad) and the kind of God who forgives our worst and instructs and inspires our best.

We read the Bible because it has it all: it has history. It has poetry. It has wisdom. It has personal correspondence that gives us insights into what life was like in that time period. But most importantly for us, it has words and reflection on the life of Jesus that allow us to align our lives with his teachings for ourselves.

See, we read the Bible to understand Jesus. We read the Bible to see what Jesus did with the teachings of the ancient Hebrews; how he incorporated them into this life. How he questioned their interpretation and built his own. We read the Bible so that we can understand how God would want us to live and we do so by following the cues of Jesus. We are his witnesses. We model our lives after him.

When we use the Bible as a monolithic, dropped-from heaven book of instructions we diminish its power and instructiveness. When we see it as a literal handbook requiring little interpretation, we lose sight of it. And frankly, we act a bit naively.

The Bible is a powerful book. It is imbued with power because it is about a life with God. And it is primarily focused – for us – on Jesus. We can't forget that. It is about Jesus. The Old Testament is the backdrop, but the New Testament is the play. The Old Testament is the backstory, and the New Testament is the feature.

But without Jesus we would not be reading the Bible. Without Jesus, the Bible would be another ancient text that was interesting, but whose story we would always be outside of.

How to Use the Bible?*

Offer a prayer, allowing the Holy Spirit to guide you in interpretation, decentering your egoic need to make the text say what you want it to say.

When we have intellectual and emotional freedom, move to detachment from your own will, needs, and desires.

Listen for a deeper voice than your own, even when it challenges you. "God does not ask and expect you to do anything new until God has first made it desirable and possible for you to do it. Grace cannot easily operate under coercion, duress, shame, or guilt."

You can trust the interpretation if you are led to your True Self, experiencing the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5). "You can trust it even if it leads you to make a formal mistake."

Any negative or punitive emotions or spirit of dismissal or exclusion is *not* Jesus at work, but your own ego.

Remember Jesus' own temptation (Matthew 4:3-10) to misuse power. Beware of egoic power needs that do not die easily.

**Making Sense of the Bible* by Adam Hamilton

***What Do We Do With the Bible?* By Richard Rohr

[Listen to the sermon by Dave Pappas.](#)