

The King James Bible

1611

About the Bible

The Holy Bible is the sacred book or Scriptures of Judaism and Christianity. The Bible of Judaism and the Bible of Christianity are different in some important ways. The Jewish Bible is the Hebrew Scriptures, 39 books originally written in Hebrew, except for a few sections in Aramaic. The Christian Bible is in two parts, the Old Testament and the 27 books of the New Testament. The Old Testament is structured in two slightly different forms by the two principal divisions of Christendom. The version of the Old Testament used by Roman Catholics is the Bible of Judaism plus 7 other books and additions to books; some of the additional books were originally written in Greek, as was the New Testament. The version of the Old Testament used by Protestants is limited to the 39 books of the Jewish Bible. The other books and additions to books are called the *Apocrypha* by Protestants; they are generally referred to as *deuterocanonical* books by Roman Catholics.

The term Bible is derived through Latin from the Greek *biblia*, or “books,” the diminutive form of *byblos*, the word for “papyrus” or “paper,” which was exported from the ancient Phoenician port city of Biblos. By the time of the Middle Ages the books of the Bible were considered a unified entity.

Order of the Books

The order as well as the number of books differs between the Jewish Bible and the Protestant and Roman Catholic versions of the Bible. The Bible of Judaism is in three distinct parts: the Torah, or Law, also called the books of Moses; the Nebiim, or Prophets, divided into the Earlier and Latter Prophets; and the Ketubim, or Writings, including Psalms, wisdom books, and other diverse literature. The Christian Old Testament organizes the books according to their type of literature: the Pentateuch, corresponding to the Torah; historical books; poetical or wisdom books; and prophetic books. Some have perceived in this table of contents a sensitivity to the historical perspective of the books: first those that concern the past; then, the present; and then, the future. The Protestant and Roman Catholic versions of the Old Testament place the books in the same sequence, but the Protestant version includes only those books found in the Bible of Judaism. The New Testament includes the four Gospels; the Acts of the Apostles, a history of early Christianity; Epistles, or letters, of Paul and other writers; and an apocalypse, or book of revelation. Some books identified as letters, particularly the Book of Hebrews, are theological treatises.

Use

The Bible is a religious book, not only by virtue of its contents but also in terms of its use by Christians and Jews. It is read in practically all services of public worship, its words form the basis for preaching and instruction, and it is used in private devotion and study. The language of the Bible has informed and shaped the prayers, liturgy, and hymnody of Judaism and Christianity. Without the Bible these two religions would have been virtually speechless. Both the confessed and actual importance of the Bible differ considerably among the various subdivisions of Judaism and Christianity, but all adherents ascribe some degree of authority to it. Many confess that the Bible is the full

and sufficient guide in all matters of faith and practice; others view the authority of the Bible in the light of tradition, or the continuous belief and practice of the church since apostolic times.

Biblical Inspiration

Early Christianity inherited from Judaism and took for granted a view of the Scriptures as authoritative. No formal doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture was initially propounded, as was the case in Islam, which held that the Koran was handed down from heaven. Christians generally believed, however, that the Bible contained the word of God as communicated by his Spirit—first through the patriarchs and prophets and then through the apostles. The writers of the New Testament books, in fact, appealed to the authority of the Hebrew Scriptures to support their claims concerning Jesus Christ. The actual doctrine of the inspiration of the Bible by the Holy Spirit and the inerrancy of its words arose during the 19th century in response to the development of biblical criticism, scholarly studies that seemed to challenge the divine origin of the Bible. This doctrine holds that God is the author of the Bible in such a way that the Bible is his word. Many theories explaining the doctrine have been suggested by biblical scholars and theologians. The theories range from a direct, divine, verbal dictation of the Scriptures to an illumination aiding the inspired writer to understand the truth he expressed, whether this truth was revealed or learned by experience.

Importance and Influence

The importance and influence of the Bible among Christians and Jews may be explained broadly in both external and internal terms. The external explanation is the power of tradition, custom, and creed: Religious groups confess that they are guided by the Bible. In one sense the religious community is the author of Scripture, having developed it, cherished it, used it, and eventually canonized it (that is, developed lists of officially recognized biblical books). The internal explanation, however, is what many Christians and Jews continue to experience as the power of the contents of the biblical books themselves. Ancient Israel and the early church knew of many more religious books than the ones that constitute the Bible. The biblical books, however, were cherished and used because of what they said and how they said it; they were officially canonized because they had come to be used and believed so widely. The Bible truly is the foundation document of Judaism and Christianity. It is commonly known that the Bible, in its hundreds of different translations, is the most widely distributed book in human history. Moreover, in all its forms, the Bible has been enormously influential, and not only among the religious communities that hold it sacred. The literature, art, and music of Western culture in particular are deeply indebted to biblical themes, motifs, and images. Translations of the Bible, such as the Authorized Version (or King James Version, 1611) and Martin Luther's translation of the Bible into German (first completed in 1534) not only influenced literature but also shaped the development of languages. Such effects continue to be felt in emerging nations, where translations of the Bible into the vernacular help to shape language traditions.

The Old Testament

It is remarkable that Christianity includes within its Bible the entire scriptures of another religion, Judaism. The term Old Testament (from the Latin word for “covenant”) came to be applied to those Scriptures on the basis of the writings of Paul and other early Christians who distinguished between the “Old Covenant” that God made with Israel and the “New Covenant” established through Jesus Christ. Because the early church believed in the continuity of history and of divine activity, it included in the Christian Bible the written records of both the Old and the New covenants. Old Testament Literature

The Old Testament may be viewed from many different perspectives. From the viewpoint of literature, the Old Testament—indeed, the entire Bible—is an anthology, a collection of many different books. The Old Testament is by no means a unified book in terms of authorship, date of composition, or literary type; it is instead a veritable library. Generally speaking, the books of the Old Testament and their component parts may be identified as narratives, poetic works, prophetic works, law, or apocalypses. Most of these are broad categories that include various distinct types or genres of literature and oral tradition. None of these categories is limited to the Old Testament; all are found in other ancient literature, especially that of the Near East. It is noteworthy, however, that certain types did not find their way into the Old Testament. Letters, or epistles, so important in the New Testament, are not found as separate books (except for the Letter of Jeremiah in some manuscript traditions). Autobiography, drama, and satire are not found at all. It is particularly striking that most Old Testament books contain several literary genres. Exodus, for example, contains narrative, laws, and poetry; most prophetic books include narratives and poetry in addition to prophetic genres as such.

Narratives In both outline and content, a great many Old Testament books are narratives; that is, they report the events of the past. If they have, as most do, a plot (or at least the development of tension and its resolution), characterization of the participants, and a description of the setting where the events occurred, then they are stories. On the other hand, a great many narrative works of the Old Testament are histories—although they would not fit a scholarly definition of the term. A history is a written narrative of the past that is guided by the facts, as far as the writer can determine and interpret them, and not by some aesthetic, religious, or other consideration. The historical narratives of the Old Testament are popular rather than critical works, because the writers often used oral traditions, some of them unreliable, to write their accounts. Moreover, all these narratives were written for a religious purpose; they may therefore be called salvation histories, because they are concerned with showing how God was active in human events. Examples of such works are the Deuteronomistic History (Deuteronomy through 2 Kings; see below), the Tetrateuch (Genesis through Numbers), and the Chronicler’s History (1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah). The so-called Throne Succession History of David (see 2 Samuel 9-20, 1 Kings 1-2) comes closer to the modern understanding of history than does any other biblical narrative. The writer was sensitive to the details of historical events and characters, and he interpreted the course of affairs in the light of human motivations. Nonetheless, he could see the hand of God moving behind the scenes. Other narrative books are Ruth, a short story; Jonah, a didactic, or teaching, story; and Esther, a historical romance or a festival legend. It is likely that such books developed from folktales or legends. Several didactic stories are found in the deuterocanonical books of the Bible and

in the Apocrypha: Tobit, Judith, Susanna, and Bel and the Dragon. Many of these and other narrative genres are found within the books of the Old Testament.

The Book of Genesis is composed, as are most of the other narrative works, of numerous individual stories, most of which originally circulated independently and orally. The patriarchal stories in Genesis 11-50 have been called legends, sagas, and—more accurately—family stories. Many of them are etiological; that is, they explain some place, practice, or name in terms of its origin.

Poetic Works

The poetic books of the Old Testament may be taken to include Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon (Songs), and in the deuterocanonical books and the Apocrypha, Sirach and the Prayer of Manasseh. The Book of Wisdom has much in common with the poetic wisdom books, but it is not poetry. Most of the prophetic books are written in Hebrew poetry, but they are sufficiently distinctive to be considered separately.

General Characteristics

Hebrew poetry has two major characteristics, one relatively easy to recognize even in translation and the other difficult to discern. The more obvious characteristic is the use of parallelismus membrorum, or parallelism of lines or other parts. For example, the meaning of one line may be restated or paralleled by a second line, as in Psalms 6:1: “O Lord, rebuke me not in thy anger, nor chasten me in thy wrath.” These two lines are synonymous. On the other hand, the second line in the unit may state the negative side of the first line’s point, as in Proverbs 15:1: “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” In other cases, the second line may extend or explain the first, and in still others, the parallelism is merely formal. Parallelism can in some instances extend to three or more lines. One major advantage of most modern English translations of the Bible is that they retain the poetic form of the Hebrew, enabling the reader to enjoy and understand the structure of the original. The other major feature of Hebrew poetry is rhythm, which seems to have been based on the number of accents in each line. One of the more easily recognized meters is that of the qina, or dirge, in which the first line has three beats or accented syllables and the second line has two. The poetic books include a great many diverse genres. The most widespread types are the various songs of worship (Psalms) and wisdom poetry. In addition, the Bible contains one book of love poetry, the Song of Solomon (Songs).

Lyrical Poetry

Israel’s worship literature was lyrical poetry, that is, poetry meant to be sung. Most, but not all, of these songs are collected in the books of Psalms. Many are hymns—songs in praise of God himself, his works on behalf of Israel, or his creation. Others are communal laments or complaint songs, which were, in effect, prayers of petition sung by the people when they were faced with trouble. Approximately one-third of the Psalms are individual laments or complaints, songs used by or on behalf of individuals facing death or disaster. When the nation or the individual has been saved from trouble, thanksgiving songs would