

LESSON 2

The Writing(s) of the Bible

In the previous lesson, we talked about the value of reading the Bible, both individually and for the good of the church. With that established, we move forward in this lesson toward understanding how one might go about the practice of Bible reading. The suggestions we offer in the next two lessons are of first importance, and are foundational for later discussions of techniques for Bible study. Ultimately, all interpretations follow in some way from the issues and choices we discuss in these lessons. In this lesson, we take a broad look at the content and purpose of the biblical writings.

WHAT IS THE BIBLE?

The Bible itself claims to be the divinely inspired Word of God (2 Tim 3:16-17, 2 Pet 1:16-21). But for anyone who has read Scripture for long enough, it is obvious that the Bible shows signs of obvious human activity to produce the Bible as we now have it. The crucial point to be made about this is that, to the contrary of some skeptics who would play these off against each other, these two claims are complimentary. *God expresses his divine word in human language, and God reveals this word through earthly activity.* As a result, we must not only respect the content of the message, but the form and means by which it comes to us. We can still have a 'high view' of Scripture by looking at from the bottom up.

We cannot take the time to go through a full description of the origins of the Bible. One thing we can definitively say is that even though God's Word was often conveyed by a direct, miraculous encounter, the transmission of that word into the written form of the Bible was a much more organic process. The Bible was not delivered to Earth by a band of heavenly angels, bound in leather and with 'Holy Bible' stamped on the front. Instead, our Bibles are the result of human activity to write, compile, edit, shape, preserve, translate and publish the text of Scripture. Rather than being a source for a crisis of faith, Christians can be assured that all of this activity is guided along by the Holy Spirit to ensure that God's Word can find its way in the hand, and ultimately the hearts, of his people.

One of the ways we could betray a normal understanding of the Bible is when we refer to it as 'The Bible.' Of course, the Bible is a single, continuous entity, but it becomes that through the way the various independent texts of Scripture are inter-related and organized. We should remember that in a key sense the Bible is not one text, but sixty-six. In fact, the best metaphor for the Bible is that of a library. The books of the Bible are sixty-six independent, self-contained books with their own ideas and intentions that have been collected and placed on the same shelf, based on their independent authority and divine origins. Our

Bibles are the assembly of these various 'Scriptural books' into the same binding, based on their independent authority as the Word of God.

THE LITERATURE OF THE BIBLE

So what are these texts? Well, for starters, these texts are old – ancient, in fact. And, they are written in ancient dialects of Hebrew and Greek, neither of which are spoken today. The (mostly Jewish) cultures and issues to which the texts were written have long since passed and have been replaced by modern concerns. All of these are unavoidable challenges of the Bible, and ones we will address later in the class – but nevertheless, *these are the types of texts that God has given us as His written word*. Christians would maintain that even though these texts were not written to us, they were written *for us*, that is for our benefit as God's people (1 Pet 1:10-12, Rom 15:4, 1 Cor 10:11).

How can we make the most of these ancient Jewish writings? First, we should note three broad types of literature which make up the Bible. In a future lesson, we will discuss different genres of biblical literature, but all of those can be categorized into one of the following:

- Narrative – almost half of all the Bible is 'story-telling.' Narrative writing is used for recording historical events, retelling of meaningful experiences, and sometimes even using creative story-telling to teach lessons (e.g. Parables). All types of narratives allow readers to reflect on their own lives through the events and characters told in story.
- Poetry – about one-third of biblical writing is poetry. Poetry intentionally uses imagery and metaphor to affect the emotions and imagination of the reader. Far from a more sequential style of writing like narrative, or logical writing like discourse, poetry communicates by trying to expand the mind of the reader to understand things in deeper and more meaningful ways
- Discourse – a final quarter of the Bible can be labeled as 'discourse.' This typically consists of speeches, letters or legal codes. Discourse literature typically tries to persuade or prove a set of ideas which the author/speaker believes to be important for the hearer, and calls the reader to respond affirmatively.

Readers should keep in mind that even though these are more or less easy to identify, any given book of the Bible may contain any or all of these types of writing.

Second, we should be aware of a broad purpose which all of these texts share. No matter what type of literature we find ourselves reading in the Bible, there is an implicit (and occasionally explicit) purpose for God's people to return to these words as a source of truth and insight. The Bible calls us not just to read it once and move on, but to meditate on it to learn about God, the world, and ourselves. Psalm 1 says of the 'Blessed man' that "...his delight is in the Law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night." And the introduction to Paul's famous statement about the inspiration of Scripture to make God's man complete in 2 Timothy is to remind him how "from childhood you have been

acquainted with the sacred writings,” with an implication that Timothy had read them all his life. A meditative reading of Scripture also requires us to read texts slowly and with focus, perhaps in combination with prayer. Sometimes this is just to understand the message of the author, but other times to allow the Bible to ‘read’ our own lives by expressing our own joys or failures through the characters or audience of the text (Heb 4:12-13)

A COMMON BODY OF TRUTH

A third important consideration for the understanding the literature of the Bible is to return to the issue of how the Bible is organized. This is known as the ‘Canon’ (or ‘measure’) of Scripture. Again, we have to shortcut any discussion of this broad topic, but the result of God’s preservation of his written Word is the collection of those texts which bear the marks of His authority. In the ‘inter-testamental’ period, the scribes of Israel put the finishing touches on the long process to unite the books of the Law, Prophets, and other Writings to form the ‘TaNaK’ which is the basis for our modern Old Testament. These scriptures record the history of God’s covenant relationship with the Israelites, leading to their eventual exile due to their sin against God. Then, in the early centuries of the spread of Christianity, the writings of the eye-witnesses and Apostles of Jesus were collected together into the New Testament. These scriptures witness to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as the fulfillment of God’s covenant promises to Israel, and his ultimate purpose to redeem the whole world.

Placing these texts together into one volume implies that these texts can be read in conjunction with one another to express a common body of truth about God and a common account of His action in the world. The biblical writers show a keen awareness of this as they frequently quote and allude to other texts of scripture to weave various ideas and themes across the biblical canon. As just two obvious examples, remember that the Psalms and Prophets call Israel to devotion to Israel’s Law, or how the New Testament writers cite the Old Testament in support of their various claims about Jesus and the church. From this we can conclude that what the biblical literature provides us is a common story and a unified worldview, and each of the biblical authors is intentionally making their own contribution to the whole.

And so, to use the same metaphor for a different purpose – the Bible is also like a cord made up of many different threads. Though they have their own independent message, those messages converge into the single story of God and his salvation of the world through Jesus Christ. This story is the bond that holds all the threads together.

It is crucial that we understand the Bible in a way which respects the inter-related content, form and context of the Scriptures. The Bible has often been viewed as just a moral handbook, or a reference work to look up the answers to religious questions. The Bible

does offer moral guidance and answers to our religious questions, but not in the same way that an encyclopedia can tell you about historical dates, or that a rulebook can tell you what the rules of a game are. Rather, those answers come from a proper understanding of what the texts of Scripture are, and how they function according to the purposes of the authors. The aim of this class is to help us be more attentive to these issues as we practice our Bible reading.

QUESTIONS:

1. If someone you don't know came up to you and asked 'What is the Bible?' how would you answer them?
2. Turn to a book of the Bible which you have never read before (or haven't read in a long time). Skim the book and identify the type of literature it is. Are there multiple types?
3. How does this statement from Scripture apply to the Bible?
"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever." (Is 40:8)
Does the fact that the Scriptures were written in a particular time, place, culture and audience impact this? Why or why not?