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Scripture Matters: Authority, Content, Canon, and Translations of the Bible

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The Bible's Central Place in Christian Faith and Practice

For Christians the Scriptures matter. Their sacred texts, commonly known as "the Bible,"[1] have a central place in forming Christian faith and practice. The Bible contains numerous writings from a period covering more than a thousand years and written or compiled by numerous people. It is divided into two main parts. Christians most often call the first part "the Old Testament" but sometimes refer to it as "the Hebrew Scriptures" because it was originally, for the most part, written in Hebrew.[2] For Jesus and the very first Christians this part of the Bible was their Scriptures. What Christians call "the New Testament" did not yet exist during the lifetime of Jesus.

Christians speak of the Bible as "sacred" or "holy," which means it has an important place in God's purposes for humanity. They commonly speak of the Bible as the Word of God, which means that Christians throughout the world consider it an authoritative book for faith and practice. Many believe the Bible is authoritative because God inspired it, but what does the word *inspire* mean? New Testament scholar Craig Koester writes,

[1] The English word "Bible" derives from the Greek word *biblion*, which means "book." See Craig Koester, *A Beginner's Guide to Reading the Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991), 9. This short book is an excellent introduction to much of what this essay covers.

[2] Ezra 4:8–6:18; 7:12–26; Daniel 2:4b–7:28 are written in Aramaic, a Semitic language closely related to Hebrew. See *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), vol. 1, s.v. "Aramaic".

> The word *inspired* is used in the Bible itself (2 Timothy 3:16)[3] and is included in official statements of many Christian groups, including Baptist, Episcopal, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Roman Catholic churches. Yet the Bible itself does not say *how* the inspiration took place and Christians have developed different positions on this issue. Some declare that each word of the Bible was communicated to the biblical authors by God. Others hold that the message was inspired but the actual words were not. Still others suggest that inspiration refers to the authors of the Bible, not to its words or message.[4]

Another way to talk about the Bible's authority is to say it has authority for Christians because it witnesses to God, what God has done by creating and caring for the creation, including humanity, and most especially what God has done through Jesus Christ. In fact, the New Testament identifies Jesus as the Word of God. Thus, "Christians believe that the words of the Scriptures are authoritative because they are primary witnesses to the *Word*, Jesus Christ."[5]

The Bible as a Library

The Bible is usually found in the form of a single book, but in reality it is a collection of many documents. For that reason, it has been likened to "a great library containing many books that were written at different times and places by different people."[6]Among Christians there is some difference about how many books are in this library. The Bible used by Protestants contains sixty-six individual books, thirty-nine in the Old Testament, twenty-seven in the New Testament. The Bible used by Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches have additional books.

Like a library, the Bible is divided into different sections. The larger section is called the Old Testament, the other is called the New Testament. "A 'testament' is a written expression of some-

[3] The Greek word is *theopneustos*, which means God-breathed or breathed into by God.

[4] Koester, *A Beginner's Guide to Reading the Bible*, 12.

[5] Ibid., 14.

[6] Ibid., 17.

one's will, and the Old and New Testaments express the will of God for people."[7] What Christians call the Old Testament is for Jews their entire Bible. Christian Bibles, on the other hand, also contain the New Testament, a collection of documents written between 50 and 110 C.E.

The Old Testament

Christian Bibles usually group the books of the Old Testament into four categories: the Pentateuch/Law, the Historical Books, the Poetical and Wisdom Books, and the Prophets. Much of the material in the Old Testament circulated orally before it was written down. Altogether, the collection of books in the Old Testament was written over a span of about one thousand years. As Koester says, the books of the Old Testament

> provide a panoramic view of God's dealings with his people over many centuries. These texts celebrate the wonder of God's creation and the joy of Israel's liberation from slavery. They portray the anguish of Israel's apostasy and God's own relentless quest to win his people back again, by disciplining them in exile and graciously liberating them once more. Through its stories and songs, prophecies and proverbs, the Old Testament bears witness to the faithfulness of God and helps people in every age discern what it means to be God's own people.[8]

The New Testament

As already mentioned, for Jesus and the earliest Christians, the Old Testament was their Bible. Eventually, new documents written by early Christians were recognized as authoritative writings that witness to what God has done in Jesus Christ and what it means to be his followers. The formation of the four New Testament Gospels occupied a period of fifty to sixty years after the time of Jesus, roughly the years 30–90 C.E. What was the process that lay behind their formation?

[7] Ibid., 18.
[8] Ibid., 40.

A couple of days after Jesus' death his disheartened disciples believed something extraordinary had happened: the one who died on a cross was now alive. They believed that God raised him from the dead. This was a transforming event. The disciples began to recall with fresh vividness what Jesus had said and done. All this was news they could not keep to themselves. It was "good news," which is what the word *gospel* means, and it had to be shared with others. They shared it first with fellows Jews in Palestine. Then, as the New Testament book of Acts tells us, they soon realized this news had significance for the whole world. They thus moved beyond the borders of Palestine into the larger world. They told the story of what Jesus had done and what he taught, and the whole story was colored by what they believed happened in his death and resurrection.

For the first few decades, this story was shared orally. That is, the written Gospels we now have were not written immediately. The story was told through preaching, teaching, and worship within the community of believers that was forming. It was also shared with people outside the community and given as verbal instruction to new believers. As this information about Jesus was told and retold, it was shaped into common patterns that made it easier to remember. New Testament scholars, through the discipline known as "form criticism," try to discern what forms or patterns the material had in the oral period. For instance, as we study the Gospels we find units of material, such as parables, miracle stories, and sayings of Jesus. In the shape in which we have them, they were easy to remember and share.

Eventually, information about Jesus that was shared orally was drawn together in written form in the New Testament Gospels. However, not all this oral material was recorded in the Gospels. We find evidence for this in the New Testament itself. Near the end of the Gospel of John, we read, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book" (20:30).[9]

[9] The Bible translation used in this essay is the *New Revised Standard Version*.

A further branch of Gospel scholarship is called "source criticism." It seeks to discover what larger blocks of material than forms lie behind the New Testament Gospels. For instance, it is widely thought that the Gospel of Mark was the first Gospel to reach its final form, and it is commonly held that Matthew and Luke drew upon Mark extensively, and often almost verbatim, in writing their Gospels. Each, however, also has material unique to his version. At the beginning of his Gospel, Luke refers to other accounts, apparently written, of Jesus' story:

> Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed. (1:1–4)

A third branch of New Testament scholarship is known as "redaction criticism."Each Gospel was originally composed for a particular context. Redaction criticism seeks to discover the special interests, emphases, and concerns that led each Gospel writer to write a Gospel for his context.

New Testament scholarship is painstaking work. To the novice, and even to those of us who have had some training in it, it seems to involve a lot of trivial detail. However, the careful and meticulous study of the Gospels does not affect their broad structure as literature that seeks to tell a story that the writers believed to be vitally important for the whole world. As John says at the end of his Gospel, "these things are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (20:31).

Yet, if the teaching of Jesus was one, then we might expect only one Gospel. Why are there four? Perhaps the best response to this question is that the writing of the Gospels was bifocal. By this we mean that the writers composed their Gospels looking back *to* Jesus but *from* the concerns and emphases of their own

context.[10] They sought to demonstrate how Jesus could be good news in their situation. That is, each Gospel was written with a particular community and situation in mind and to explain how Jesus was relevant to that situation.

Yet, it might further be asked, why four Gospels and not more? Certainly there were more situations and contexts in the early church than four. The early church thought about this question, and in fact more than four Gospels circulated among early Christians, accounts claiming to present an authentic picture of Jesus. The early church excluded other possibilities, because they were judged to have interpreted the story of Jesus in a questionable or unacceptable manner.

What does this teach us about the Christian understanding of the Bible as revelation? Generally, Christians do not see the Bible as a verbatim record of what God spoke through the prophets. They talk about God through the Holy Spirit working to inspire and guide the biblical writers, but they were not simply passive instruments; they were actively involved in the process.

What about the Epistles, the other major part of the New Testament? These are personal correspondence. They are letters from early Christian leaders—Paul, Peter, James, and John—addressed to cities and small churches in them or to individuals. How can these be considered divine revelation? By New Testament criteria, such letters are not incompatible with revelation. They were part of the life of the developing church. They educated new believers in the meaning and responsibilities of discipleship. They were part of the same world in which the Gospels were formed, but they had a different purpose. Their purpose was not to tell the story of Jesus. Rather, they were written to give spiritual and moral education in what it means to be Christian.[11]

Paul's letters predate the written Gospel portraits of Jesus. Written between the years 50 and 60 C.E., his letters were com-

[10] Kenneth Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim: An Exploration* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1985), 83.

[11] For further explication, see Kenneth Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), 249–53, and Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, 92–99.

posed during the oral period of Gospel formation, described briefly above, when information about Jesus was being passed around orally, not yet in a final written form. However, Paul's letters presuppose the information about Jesus that was developing into the Gospel portraits. His call to new Christian communities to imitate Jesus makes sense only against this background. How Christians live, and what they do, is based on who Jesus was and is.

One of the loveliest New Testament passages, Philippians 2:1–11, calls on the Philippians to be ruled in all their actions by "the mind of Christ." Paul then describes what he means by praising Jesus' self-giving. Of course, this could only make sense in light of the Gospel material about Jesus that was circulating orally. So we see that the Epistles supplemented the Gospels in embracing Jesus as Lord and Savior. These two different types of literature presented a joint witness, the one a narrative account of Jesus' story, the other having a pastoral function of nurturing the new Christian communities in what it means to be followers of Jesus.

How are these letters relevant now after their time and outside their context? Their original destination was specific. They were very personal. Why should they be included in the New Testament? The answer is that they should be seen as offering precedents that can be interpreted for ongoing guidance in other times and places. The situations the apostles handled in these letters continually recur. These letters still have value because the guidance they offer was based in real human situations, not in hypothetical cases.

The New Testament Canon

The collection of the New Testament writings into what Christians call the "canon" took several centuries to be finalized. The final collection as we have it today goes back to the fourth century, but even then the final collection only recognized documents long-established among Christians. What is the canon?

The New Testament contains twenty-seven writings known as the New Testament Canon. Canon is a Greek word that means "measuring rod."[12] The writings of the New Testament were selected from many other early Christian writings as having a special status. They were accepted as the authoritative expression of the faith passed on from the time of the apostles. They are the standard against which other teachings and writings are to be measured.

The formation of the canon took more than three centuries, though most of the New Testament books were recognized as authoritative by the late second century. Through a process of consensus, the four Gospels were so acknowledged early, along with the thirteen Epistles of Paul and the book of Acts. By the late fourth century, the church in Europe and North Africa reached agreement about the books of the New Testament as the developing consensus received the endorsement of ecclesiastical councils. The process took a little longer further east in the Syrian church, spilling over into the fifth century.[13]

Two factors stimulated this development. One was the precedent of the Old Testament, which by the time of Jesus enjoyed general acceptance among the Jews as a body of sacred, authoritative writings. As already mentioned, the Old Testament was the first scripture of the Christians. However, second, the teachings of Jesus and his apostles naturally came to have a dominant place in the life of the early church. They were continually referred to in preaching, teaching, and worship.[14]

After the period of the first apostles, there was a steady growth of writings, both gospels and letters (e.g. the Nag Hammadi collection). These needed to be assessed. Some of these belonged to groups of people judged to be too far outside the mainstream of the church. Some of these groups claimed to have special knowledge beyond what the first disciples of Jesus taught

[12] Harry Y. Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 15.

[13] Ibid., 23–56; Koester, *A Beginner's Guide to Reading the Bible,* 61–63.

[14] Gamble, *The New Testament Canon*, 57–59; Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, 115.

(e.g., the Gnostics). To stem the development of such groups, it was necessary to have authoritative scriptures that could be used to measure or assess their claims.[15]

The recognition of this body of Scripture took time. Several criteria were utilized in determining whether or not a document could be accepted. One criterion was apostolic authority. This did not mean that all the New Testament writings were actually written by the apostles, but their contents were attributed to one of Jesus' disciples or their close associates. Other criteria included: catholicity, a document's relevance to the whole church; orthodoxy, a document's agreement with the faith of the church; and traditional usage, whether a document was commonly used in the worship and teaching of numerous churches.[16]

The canonical process began very early. We can even say it began in the time of the apostles as Christians selected material to be used in preaching, teaching, and worship.[17]As the Gospel of John says, not everything he was aware of went into the composition of his Gospel (20:30). Again, the words of New Testament scholar Craig Koester are pertinent here.

> The books of the New Testament take readers on a journey through the ministry of Jesus and the formation of the early church. The texts capture the exuberance of the crowds who awaited Jesus' healing touch and the horror of Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion. They depict the astonishment of the disciples who witnessed the resurrection and provide glimpses into the joys and challenges confronting the community of faith. Through stories, songs, and letters, the New Testament bears witness to the love of God in Jesus Christ and helps Christians of every time and place understand what it means to be Jesus' disciples.[18]

[15] Koester, *A Beginner's Guide to Reading the Bible*, 61–63; Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, 115–16; Gamble, *The New Testament Canon*, 59-72.

[16] Gamble, *The New Testament Canon*, 67–71.

[17] Brevard Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 16–33, esp. 21.

[18] Koester, *A Beginner's Guide to Reading the Bible*, 53.

Translations of the Bible

The Christian understanding of Scripture and the desire to disseminate it broadly in other languages can be seen as grounded in incarnational theology. For Christians, God has always been active in history, but the pivotal moment of God's work in history is the person and work of Jesus Christ. They confess that the Word of God was incarnated in Jesus. This not only means that God's Word was embodied in a particular human being but also in the culture and language of that person. Yet, from the beginning, Christians have seen the story of God's activity in Jesus as having relevance beyond his time, culture, and language, and the oral and written telling of that story as capable of being embodied in other cultures and languages. Mission scholar Ulrich Fick writes,

> It is impressive to see how much the written message of God shares and expresses the essence of his incarnation in Christ.
>
> We confess that Jesus of Nazareth was true God and true man. In this dual identity he personified the creator in creation, the infinite in a finite being. Jesus could be misunderstood and misinterpreted like any other human being, because he was fully human, and at the same time people encountered in him the fullness of God which is beyond explanation.
>
> The Scripture which speaks of Christ can be described in exactly the same terms. "The Word became flesh" is the theme of any version of the Bible, not merely in the sense that God condescends to allow us to describe him in anthropomorphisms (what other way do we have to describe a person, even if this person is beyond our ability to describe?), but in the much deeper sense that he enters our thought patterns and speech forms so that we can hear him in our words. . . .
>
> The vulnerability of God in man is continued in the vulnerability of the Scriptures. The Bible can be misunderstood as much as Christ could. The Bible can be misused in a variety of ways, just as there are attempts galore to misuse Christ: magically, selectively, nostalgically, or, worse, supporting of our own ideas and goals.[19]

[19] Ulrich Fick, "The Bible Societies—Fruit and Tool of Mission," *International Review of Mission* 70 (July 1981): 123–24.

The fact that the New Testament documents were first written in Greek rather than the Aramaic Jesus and his first disciples spoke shows how quickly the message about him moved beyond its first cultural and linguistic context, as his disciples journeyed beyond the confines of Palestine into the surrounding world. As noted by mission scholar Lamin Sanneh, the Apostle Paul was a key figure in this breakthrough.

> Paul formulated pluralism as the necessary outworking of the religion he believed Jesus preached. That pluralism was rooted for Paul in the Gentile breakthrough, which in turn justified cross-cultural tolerance in Christian mission. One idea in Paul's thought is that God does not absolutize any one culture, whatever the esteem in which God holds culture. The second is that all cultures have cast upon them the breath of God's favor, thus cleansing them of all stigma of inferiority and untouchability.[20]

No doubt, the fact that Paul was a Jew who grew up in a Hellenistic cultural context and was able to think and communicate in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek aided him as he moved across cultural and linguistic frontiers. His work, and that of other known and unknown followers of Jesus in this early period of Christian history, served as an important impetus for the Christian recognition of all cultures and their languages as acceptable in God's eyes, making it possible to speak and write about God's work in other languages. This is a quality of Christianity that led Sanneh to write that "the genius of the religion" is its "ability to adopt each culture as its natural destination and as a necessity of its life."[21]

There was an important precedent for rendering the record of God's dealings with humanity into other languages. Prior to the time of Jesus, the Old Testament was translated into Greek in what is known as the Septuagint. The subsequent rendering of the Bible—both Old and New Testaments, in part or in their entirety—into numerous languages through the centuries is rooted in

[20] Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Marynoll, Orbis Books, 1989), 47.

[21] Ibid., 69.

the conviction that God respects and can utilize any culture and its language(s) to convey the story and teachings that it contains.[22]

Even with such rationale for rendering the Bible into the many languages of humankind, some will ask, why have there been multiple translations into the same language? We can point to several factors, which revolve around the twin concerns for accuracy and readability. First, previously unknown Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek manuscripts continue to be discovered, which sometimes, after careful and reasoned comparison, scholars judge bring us closer to the original text than previously known manuscripts did. Periodic new translations strive to take these discoveries into account. Second, scholars continue to learn more about biblical languages and cultures, which help us to understand better the Bible and the contexts to which its writings were originally addressed. Such factors are then taken into account when trying to render the meanings of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek words and phrases into modern-day languages. Third, modern-day languages do not remain static. They change over time, as old words take on new meanings, new words enter into usage, and people look for translations that are more readable in light of the contemporary use of their language(s). Some of these changes may occur over a period of centuries, others happen in a matter of decades or less.[23] Fourth, translations in particular languages, such as English, take into account "different kinds of readers, having different degrees and different kinds of exposure to the Scriptures."[24] There are, for instance, readers who have had little or no exposure to the Bible, others who have been taught that they cannot trust the Bible, and others who may seem to be well acquainted with it but find it confusing.[25]Finally, translators

[22] For a good introduction to the history of the transmission of the Christian message through many languages and cultures and some of the interesting ramifications, see Sanneh, *Translating the Message*.

[23] Koester, *A Beginner's Guide to Reading the Bible*, 79–80.

[24] Eugene A. Nida, "Bible Translation for the Eighties," *International Review of Mission* 70 (July 1981): 133.

[25] Ibid., 133–35.

not only take into account the biblical languages in relation to their context but the receptive languages in relation to their contexts, for example, their histories, religions, economy, anthropologies, and physical environments. This then impacts how translators seek to convey the meaning of the original texts in ways that make sense in today's terms.

As Sanneh writes, at the root of the Christian desire through the centuries to translate their scriptures into vernacular languages is the conviction that "in Jesus Christ was to be found the message of salvation, a message that was expected to cohere in the vernacular." Christians have "expected the vernacular to be the congenial locus for the word of God, the eternal *logos*[26] who finds familiar shelter across all cultures, but one also by which and in which all cultures find their authentic, true destiny."[27]

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[26] A Greek word that can be translated as "word." Perhaps the best known New Testament use of it occurs at the beginning of John's Gospel: "In the beginning was the *logos*, and the *logos* was with God, and the *logos* was God. . . . And the *logos* became flesh and lived among us, . . ." (1:1, 14).

[27] Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 205.