

# 1

## The Bible: A Gradually Emerging Collection

### Summary and Learning Objectives

1. The Bible is a collection of writings that vary in authorship, perspective, genre, and date. The Bible represents many ancient voices, so how do these voices differ? After reading this chapter (alongside chapter 1 of Sumney's text), the reader should be able *to identify several such differences*.
2. Groups are formed by commonalities and by identifying boundaries. Many religious groups use the Bible as a boundary marker. After reading this chapter (alongside chapter 1 of Sumney's text), the reader should be able *to talk about why the Bible is used to include and exclude people*.
3. Different groups use different forms of the Bible. After reading this chapter (alongside chapter 1 of Sumney's text), the reader should be able *to identify at least three different collections (or "canons") of biblical books*.
4. Not only is the Bible a library of several books; these books were brought together in a process of "canonization." After reading this chapter (alongside chapter 1 of Sumney's text), the reader should be able *to say why certain books were included in the Bible while other books were not*.

### Key Terms

**Apostle** Most generally it means one who is sent. In the early church it comes to designate those who are recognized as the authorities in the church, particularly the Twelve (after they replace

Judas), James, the brother of Jesus who becomes the leader of the Jerusalem church, and Paul. Others could be apostles in the sense that they were sent on missions by their churches, but these fourteen people were seen as sent by Christ and so as authoritative.

**Apostolicity** The virtue having been written by, or related to, an apostle (related to whether books were included in the Bible).

**Canon** A group of authoritative writings.

**Dead Sea Scrolls** The manuscripts found in the caves around the Qumran compound at the northwestern end of the Dead Sea. Among the scrolls were numerous commentaries on biblical books. These scrolls provide some of the earliest evidence for the form of the text of the Hebrew Bible.

**Tanakh** A common name for the Hebrew Bible within the Jewish community. It is an acronym based on the three parts of those texts: the Torah (T); the Nevi'im (N), or Prophets; and the Ketuvim (K), or Writings.

## Key Themes

- ▶ the many voices within the Bible
- ▶ the multiple interpretations and uses of the Bible
- ▶ how the Bible was formed
- ▶ the different shapes that the Bible takes

## Primary Text

### One Book, Many Voices

Many western people, people of faith and otherwise, think of the Bible like a singular textbook. Indeed, the very title “Bible” comes from the Greek word *biblos* meaning “book”—just one book. Yet any person who spends time reading the Bible realizes quite quickly that multiple hands were at work preparing the many different books (most Protestant Bibles

have 66 books) that come together to form the Bible. This fact ought to reveal two things about the Bible:

1. For as long as there has been a Bible, people have recognized the value of placing different perspectives together. Some of the books put forth legal instructions for ancient Israelites; others communicate the elegance and loveliness of the path of wisdom. Some of the books contain stories that are family-appropriate; others are decidedly R-rated. Some these book feature a divine voice from Heaven, portraying God as a character in the story; others do not feature the voice of God at all. Reading the various books of the Bible is a process of balancing various perspectives. We are very rarely given a singular view on topics related to God, humanity, and the way the world works. It is also important to keep in mind that not all of these perspectives are harmonious. The New Testament includes the voices of both Peter and Paul, two leaders who are at odds: Paul says of Peter: “I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned!” (Galatians 2:11). Good students of the Bible must learn to appreciate the tension created by multiple points of view.

2. Traditionally, Western people have held these various perspectives together. The people who composed, edited, and collected the books of the Bible must have been comfortable putting two creation accounts together: compare Genesis chapters 1 and 2. They must have comfortable setting two accounts of the same history side by side: compare the books of Kings and Chronicles. Indeed the first Christians thought it was necessary to include *four different* perspectives on the life of Jesus: compare Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. With this in mind, we shouldn't expect that the Bible will provide a simple and straightforward answer to any particular question that we might have. The Bible has been used for millennia as a sacred and holy guide. Such guidance

is best heard as a chorus of voices, not a monologue from on high.

It should seem obvious then that no single reader of the Bible will come away with a perfect point of view. I don't doubt that Dr. Sumney and I will differ at times on how to best interpret a passage. I also don't doubt that our interpretations will differ at times from many other pastors and professors who teach about the Bible. There ought to be room enough for multiple voices at the table. Inevitably some voices will be more compelling than others, but multiple perspectives should be seen as a virtue not a hindrance.

In my experience, the students who have the greatest difficulty understanding the Bible are those who seek simple and definitive answers from the Bible. Such readers often resort to just reading a few familiar passages within the Bible. Perhaps the best way to misunderstand the Bible is to neglect the parts that are confusing or troubling. Another obstacle to understanding is this notion: *if my pastor or favorite teacher taught me X, surely the Bible cannot teach something that contradicts X!* I often tell my students to sit down and read a biblical story as if they knew nothing previous about the characters in the story. Sometimes reading a passage with an open mind can reveal something entirely new and bring the text to life in a powerful way.

I also advise my students to *keep reading!* The Bible can be deceptively familiar. For example, almost every child in Western culture has heard the story of Noah's ark. But reading Genesis 6 for the first time as an adult can be a dramatically different experience. Take a look at Genesis 6:1-4. My bet is that the picture book at your grandmother's house doesn't tell of the "sons of God" who have sex with human women and give birth to semi-divine creatures. Or consider Genesis 7:1-3. Did Noah take the

animals "two by two" onto the ark, or was it sets of seven? If you skip passages in the Bible because you think that you already know them, you might be missing out on a fascinating experience. Finally, it is always best to read the Bible *itself* when learning about the Bible. My hope is that you'll keep a Bible handy when you use this study companion. As you begin studying the Bible, I would advise you to be prepared to listen to many voices, not to expect any simple answer to any question that might arise, and do your best to read as much of the Bible as you can.

## A Canon of Voices

When did the various books of the Bible become unified? Who decided which books were holy enough to make it into the Bible? What process was in place to ensure the integrity of this unifying effort? These are all questions about the "canon" of the Bible. When used in biblical studies, the term canon means "a group of authoritative writings." However, you may have also heard the term used of official church leaders.

The idea of being "official" is important here. For example, Genesis is *officially* in the Bible. It is included in the Jewish canon, called the Tanakh (Christians think of the Jewish canon as the Old Testament). Genesis is also *officially* in the various Christian canons. The Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant Churches all hold Genesis as *officially* inspired by God. Whereas a book like the Gospel of Thomas is not in any official canon. This is to say that Thomas is studied by scholars but not held as authoritative by any surviving worshipping community. When scholars refer to the "canonical Gospels" they mean specifically the first four books of the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Although we know that Christians were reading the Gospel of Thomas as early as the second century C.E., it was never

regarded as officially a part of the New Testament, and in the fourth century it was specifically rejected as unfit for the canon.

It is often difficult to say exactly why one book was included in the canon while another book (which seems very similar in many ways) was excluded. However, we do hear voices from early Christianity that discuss this issue. For example, one of the key virtues of the four canonical Gospels is that they're all connected in some way to an important follower (or apostle) of Jesus. Writing about one hundred years after Jesus, Justin Martyr calls the Gospels "the memoirs which, as I have said, were drawn up by the apostles and their followers" (*Dial.* 103.8). This is interesting because two of the canonical Gospels, Mark and Luke, were not composed by "apostles" of Jesus. Indeed, we have only guesses about the identity of these authors. Mark seems to have been traditionally connected to the apostle Peter. A Christian writer named Eusebius (writing in the fourth century) refers to a connection between Mark and Peter:

Mark having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately whatsoever he remembered. It was not, however, in exact order that he related the sayings or deeds of Christ. For he neither heard the Lord nor accompanied Him. But afterwards, as I said, he accompanied Peter, who accommodated his instructions to the necessities [of his hearers], but with no intention of giving a regular narrative of the Lord's sayings. Wherefore Mark made no mistake in thus writing some things as he remembered them. For of one thing he took especial care, not to omit anything he had heard, and not to put anything fictitious into the statements. [This is what is

related by Papias (an early-second-century church leader from Turkey) regarding Mark.] (*Hist. Eccl.* 3.39.15-16).

So while Mark was not written by an apostle, it at least is connected with the memories of an apostle. *So what about Luke?* Traditionally, "Luke" has been associated with one of the apostle Paul's traveling companions by the same name. The Book of Acts is believed to be written by the same author. The Book of Revelation also enjoys a claim to "apostolicity," in that it is connected with "John." It is sometimes called "John's Apocalypse." So we might say that a strong claim to "apostolicity" (or having a strong connection to an official apostle) was an important factor for canonization. Many letters with the apostle Paul's name attached to them are therefore included. The letter to the Hebrews is a notable exception, as it is anonymously authored. However, multiple early Christian sources guess that Hebrews was written by Paul anyway. The modern scholarly consensus is that Paul was not the author.

The key assumption here is that the apostles (those sent out to preach by Jesus) can be trusted to convey divine truth. In speaking of the way the truth was communicated to the church, Clement of Rome says, "The apostles have preached the Gospel to us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ [has done so] from God. Christ therefore was sent forth by God, and the apostles by Christ. Both these appointments, then, were made in an orderly way, according to the will of God. Having therefore received their orders, and being fully assured by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, and established in the word of God" (First Epistle to the Corinthians 43, written 95–100 C.E.).

Irenaeus, in his work entitled *Against Heresies* (written sometime around 182–188 C.E.), wrote:

Since therefore we have such proofs, it is not necessary to seek the truth among others which it is easy to obtain from the Church; since the apostles, like a rich man [depositing his money] in a bank, lodged in her hands most copiously all things pertaining to the truth: so that every man, whosoever will, can draw from her the water of life" (3.4.1).

Since, therefore, the tradition from the apostles does thus exist in the Church, and is permanent among us, let us revert to the Scriptural proof furnished by those apostles who did also write the Gospel, in which they recorded the doctrine regarding God, pointing out that our Lord Jesus Christ is the truth, and that no lie is in Him (3.5.1).

A similar logic was applied to the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible). Jewish tradition held that the Pentateuch was written by Moses. Because Moses received his instruction from God on Mount Sinai (indeed, by God's own hand!—see Exod. 31:18), Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy enjoyed a special status within the Jewish canon. So the "five books of Moses" (as they are sometimes called) were the most securely official.

Many of the psalms, short stories, and poems called simply the "Writings" (including Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, 1 and 2 Chronicles) were among the least secure. Indeed, during the time of Jesus, it is quite possible that the "Writings" were not yet officially part of a recognized canon of Scripture. Among the fragments of the Dead Sea Scrolls (an ancient Jewish library found in Israel circa 1947) are a handful of psalms

that were never included in any modern Bibles. This is further evidence that many "writings" were less than "official" as late as 200 C.E.

It does seem more likely, however, that the "Prophets" were thought to be canonical by most Jews during Jesus' time (including Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Amos, Micah, Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi). Notice that the subheading "Prophets" would also have included many narratives as well. The books of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings are often referred to as the "former prophets". The "latter prophets" would include Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and also "the twelve" others.

Eventually the Jewish canon consisted of

- Torah*—Hebrew for "legal instruction"; also another way to refer to the five books of Moses (Pentateuch);
- Nevi'im*—Hebrew for "Prophets";
- Ketuvim*—Hebrews for "Writings".

The first letters of these three words (T, N, and K) form the acronym *TNK*. Today the Jewish biblical canon is called the "Tanakh" or "Tanak."

The Tanakh does not include any books of the New Testament. This leads many Christians to equate it with their Old Testament. While it is true that the Tanakh and the Old Testament share the same books, translations and uses will differ. Another important difference is how these two canons end. The Old Testament ends with Malachi 4:5-6: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse." These final verses of the Old Testament suggest a need for repentance and a

warning of a curse from the Lord. They also refer to the return of the prophet Elijah (who was believed to have escaped death and taken to heaven). This “ending” creates a problem to be solved by the New Testament. Indeed many early Christians believed that John the Baptist was “the Elijah who was to come” (Matthew 11:14). More importantly, both Jesus comes preaching repentance, as hoped for by Malachi. So from a Christian perspective, the Old Testament connects directly to the New Testament.

But the Tanakh ends with 2 Chronicles (not Malachi) and thus with an idealistic portrait of Israel’s golden age. There is no great problem to be solved at the end of the Tanakh. It is complete. The Jewish books that come later are attempts to interpret, illuminate, and expand Scripture. These later Jewish texts are not a new “testament” as in Christian tradition. It is therefore not uncommon to hear the term “postbiblical period” used of the time of Jesus and the New Testament.

This simply illustrates the reality that the Bible is used differently, and is shaped differently, by different groups. Moreover it looks differently to different groups. As Dr. Sumney discusses in his textbook,

groups naturally create boundaries to maintain a sense of collective identity. *We are women. We support religious freedom. We root for the San Francisco Giants. We get together to watch Wes Anderson films. We stand up against human trafficking.* These are all statements that serve as boundary markers.

Many faith communities use the Bible (and patterns or styles of reading the Bible) as a boundary marker. *We take the Bible literally. We believe that the Bible arcs toward justice. We believe that Genesis teaches of six 24-hour days of creation. The Bible must be interpreted by the Church in order to be understood. We believe that the New Testament supersedes the Old Testament.* Such statements serve to mark off “insiders” from “outsiders.” So not only does the Bible’s official canon vary, the Bible is used differently from group to group. While we might say that the biblical canon is “closed” (in other words, very few groups are adding new books to their canon), the shape the Bible takes among worshipping communities is ever changing. And the reverse is true too: the Bible’s shape helps to shape the group that reads it.

## Questions for Group Discussion

1. Using the above description of canons alongside Sumney’s discussion of the Apocrypha, which religious tradition do you think produced your copy of the Bible?
2. Which parts of the Bible do you think are most read by the groups you’ve encountered?
3. Read Proverbs 26:4 and then Proverbs 26:5; what does the fact that these two instructions are placed side by side say about the editor or collector of Proverbs?

## Questions for Reflection

1. How might you think of the Gospel of Mark differently if you were certain the apostle Peter composed it?

