

North Chesterfield MMA 2008-2009

WEDNESDAY 3 JUNE 2009

Holy Scripture: big picture

What is the gist of the story? What is the Pentateuch? the Torah? Why so many versions? Why are books in different order in different Bibles? What does canonical mean? What is the Apocrypha and why does it matter? When were the books written? What are they based on?

NB dates given are very approximate—to give rough idea only

Hebrew Scripture (OT): history of 'Israel'; need for and expectation of the Messiah:

- Creation myths based on Mesopotamian epics (eg *Epic of Gilgamesh*, a bit like *Lord of the Rings*, or the Norse Sagas like *Nibelungs*, *Noggin the Nog* etc)
- Israelite history
- Personal stories, the human condition
- Prophets' warnings, lamentations and visions
- Songs of praise, glory and encouragement
 - see over for more detail

Christian Scripture (NT): the coming of the Messiah and the new Kingdom

- Mark, Matthew, Luke tell of Jesus and his activities—the *synoptic* gospels (70-80 AD).
 - Which came first?
 - Why are there differences and conflicts?
- John puts Jesus and his activities into a theological systematic context; focuses on Jesus' mission to bring *logos* ('word' or 'rationality') to disciples (about 90 AD).
- Acts: activities of the apostles after the Ascension, to spread the word—continuation of Luke, so Luke-Acts (70-100 AD).
- writings of Paul to communities he had visited, to encourage and warn them not be taken in by 'scheisters' (my word not his). They are *responses*; we don't know what provoked them. Some are the earliest Christian writings (1 Thessalonians, about 40-50 AD).
- writings of others to various people and communities to teach, to admonish, to help keep them on track and to encourage (up to about 110 AD).
- the writings of a visionary (*Apocalypse*, or *Revelation*), part admonishing, part ecstatic (date: views differ, 70-100 AD). 'ravings of a maniac, no more worthy nor capable of explanation than the incoherencies of our own nightly dreams' (Thomas Jefferson).

All these are the generally accepted as *canonical* (approved) writings by most churches. Other books (e.g. Enoch) are regarded as canonical only by some churches: Syrian, Ethiopian, Russian etc. And there are yet others, such as *Protogospel of James (Protevangelium Jacobi)*, *Gospel of Thomas*, and others, that helped build up and still sustain Christian spirituality.

A Sunday School ditty from my youth (Methodist Hymn Book 1933, No. 857):

God has given us a Book full of stories,
which was made for His people of old,
it begins with the tale of a garden,
and it ends with the city of gold.

Maria Matilda Penstone (1859-1910)

- *Big picture* stuff, and how did it come to be as it is? *Why so many versions?*
- The Law. *In whose interest was this written? Is it reasonable? it relevant to us?*
- History, Prophets, Wisdom, Psalms, Poetry. *Images of God. Headmaster, lover, parent, problem-solver, disturber, creator, inscrutable, silent partner, ...*
- Gospels. *Why four? Why only four? Which came first? Why were they written? how were they compiled? Why contradictions? Why omissions?*
- Paul and the rest. *To whom were the epistles written, and why? What is gnosticism? Should Christianity be called Paulinity?*
- Authority: *how should we use Holy Scripture? Guide or rulebook? If we ignore Paul's rules about women in church, why not ignore others as well? Sexuality, morality, the role of reason, tradition ... and more.*

Looking at Hebrew Scripture in slightly more depth

- Different versions (Jewish, Christian), different order.
- Septuagint, often abbreviated as LXX: Greek translation of Hebrew Scripture.
- Vulgate: 5th century Latin translation from the Greek by Jerome (Hieronymus).
- Dating very difficult. Much uncertainty and disagreement.

Noddy's guide:

- Creation
- In the garden, expulsion
- Populating the earth
- YHWH rather cross, so flood
- Repopulation (things are no better really, but no more catastrophic floods anyway)
- Rules for healthy living and godly living
- The chosen people ('Israel') and their trials
- Getting things wrong again and again and again and again
- YHWH's faithfulness to his people, and forgiveness
- YHWH's inscrutability (and, IMHO, irascibility)
- The expectation of the Messiah

Pentateuch = Torah = The Law (by tradition, from Moses)

- Genesis (origins).
 - primeval history (1:1-11:26): Adam, Eve, wilfulness, flood, Babel
 - patriarchal stories (11:27-50:26): Abra(ha)m, captivity in Egypt, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph.
- Exodus. Israel in Egypt, Moses, plagues, trek, Sinai, 10 Cs, ordering of worship.
- Leviticus. Named after Levi (son of Jacob) whose family was chosen by God as priests in the Tabernacle. Corporate and personal laws regarding worship and religious activities: cleanliness, morality, ethics, hygiene.
- Numbers. Names, censuses. aka 'In the Wilderness': Israelites' rebellion wandering in Sinai and Moab (now Jordan, east of the Dead Sea). Covers a brief period.
- Deuteronomy. 'Second law', repetition of much in Ex, Levit, Numb. Given to Israel on plains of Moab (now Jordan) just before their entrance into the Promised Land of Canaan under the command of Joshua. Moses' last address before his death (Mount Nebo [I've been there!] from where he could see promised land). Only two men that escaped from Egypt remained, so repetition of law was necessary.
- Dating very controversial. Archaeology important. Maybe about 500 BC, but reflect oral traditions much older.

Books of History

- Joshua, Judges, Ruth: tribulations, remnant of Israel, stories. Joshua continuation of one version of Torah?
- 1 & 2 Samuel: confederation to nation.
- 1 & 2 Kings: David to Babylonian exile, division into Judah and Israel.
- 1 & 2 Chronicles: similar, more rules for living.
- Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther: Babylon, return from Babylon to Judah, rebuild Temple.

Books of Poetry = The Writings

- Job: patience in the face of trials, 'most profound and literary work of the entire Old Testament', Satan (adversary), concepts of Wisdom (another week).
- Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon/Songs. Literature and imagery of great beauty, wisdom, and all human emotions. Some of the Psalms summarise history of Israel (eg Psalm 78, a wonderful rollercoaster ride). The *Song* is erotica, some believe signifying relationship between Christ and his bride, the body of believers.

Major Prophets, covering events 750-550 BC

- Isaiah (probably x3), Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel

Minor Prophets, covering events 750-475 BC

- Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi

Apocrypha (deuterocanon): *not in 'Protestant' Bibles*

- 1 & 2 Esdras, Tobit, Judith, Rest of Esther, Wisdom (of Solomon), Ecclesiasticus (= Sirach), Baruch, Song of the Three Children (= *Benedicite*, part of Daniel in some Bibles), Story of Susanna (part of Daniel in some Bibles), Bel & the Dragon (part of Daniel in some Bibles), Prayer of Manasses, 1 & 2 Maccabees