

THE BIBLE

The Bible is not just one book recording the sayings of just one man. "Bible" is a word given to a collection of sixty-six books written by over forty authors over a period of more than one-thousand and five-hundred years. The books vary in style and content. There is prose, poetry, allegory, history and predictions of future events.

The Old Testament

Thirty-nine were written before the Lord Jesus was born, in Hebrew and Aramaic. These are the collection of Jewish sacred scriptures which Christians call the Old Testament. The first was written about one-thousand and four hundred years BC and the last about four-hundred years BC. The Jewish arrangement of the books differs from that in the Christian Old Testament but the content is the same. In the New Testament these books are called "the scriptures" (i.e. the writings).

The New Testament

The remaining twenty seven were written in Greek, in the first century AD, after the Lord Jesus had ascended to heaven. Christians call these the New Testament.

The first four books give biography of the Lord Jesus up to His ascension into heaven. They are called "Gospels" because this information forms the basis of the gospel. The word gospel means: good news. The "good news" is that eternal salvation is available to everyone because of the death, burial and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. [See 1 Corinthians 15.] The anglicised words Messiah (from Hebrew) and Christ (from Greek) both mean: the anointed one. Priests, kings and prophets had ceremonial oil poured over them indicating they were appointed by God to their office (e.g. Aaron and his sons anointed to be priests, Exodus 30:25 & 30, Psalm 133:2). So they were known as the Lord's anointed. Because of several prophecies in their sacred scriptures Jews anticipated a future perfect eternal "anointed one", God's final solution for the Jews and for the whole of humanity.

In the New Testament, the Lord Jesus is referred to specifically as "the Christ" and is regarded as that long awaited Messiah, of whom the previous anointed ones were a shadow, a hint. In His capacity of Messiah/Christ, the Lord Jesus chose twelve of His disciples to be His personal apostles. The word apostle is an anglicized Greek word meaning: envoy. It was one of these, Judas Iscariot, who betrayed the Lord Jesus and then committed suicide.

The fifth book of the New Testament is called "The Acts of the Apostles". It is a historical book written by Doctor Luke, a Christian medical doctor who knew the Lord Jesus' mother and His apostles and the Apostle Paul. It is a sequel to his biography of Jesus, which is known as "The Gospel According to Luke". The "Acts of the Apostles" starts at the ascension of the Lord Jesus and finishes with the Apostle Paul's imprisonment in Rome. After the Lord had ascended to heaven, the apostles chose a disciple named Matthias to replace Judas Iscariot [Acts chapter 1]. Later the Lord Jesus miraculously appeared to a Jew whose Hebrew name was Saul, and chose him to be His apostle [Acts chapter 9 and 1 Corinthians chapter 9 verse 1 & 2]. Like many cosmopolitan Jews of the time, he also had a Greek name: Paulos, in English: Paul. So he became known as the Apostle Paul. He was the last of the Lord's personal apostles [1 Corinthians chapter 15 verse 8 & 9]. The Acts of the Apostles tells how the Lord Jesus started His church, how the gospel was preached, first to Jews and then to Gentiles [non-Jews] and what people were told they needed to do to become Christians. Here we have real-life worked-examples of how people become Christians in the Bible sense of the word.

The next twenty-one New Testament books are epistles (i.e. letters) to churches, to Christians in general and to individuals. They are full of spiritual guidance, encouragement and warnings.

The last book is a highly figurative book. It presents the condition of churches at the end of the first century, forecasts troubles that will affect God's people and gives advice on remaining faithful. It predicts God's final triumph over evil, the inevitable

eternal misery of disbelievers and promises eternal blessing for the faithful.

Sub-divisions

The books have been given titles and been divided up into chapters and verses, to help us to pinpoint passages. For example Deut.5:6 is a shorthand way of referring to verse 6 in chapter 5 in the book called Deuteronomy. However a reference like 1 John 3:16 would be used where there is more than one book of the same name. The sequence is: book number, book title, chapter, verse. 1 John 3:16 refers to the first epistle (i.e. letter) of John chapter three, verse sixteen. This must be distinguished from John 3:16 which is the Gospel of John chapter three verse sixteen. If there are no chapter divisions in the book then only the verse is given. For example Jude 3 refers to the third verse of the epistle of Jude. On the other hand if a whole chapter is meant then the verse numbers are omitted. 1 Corinthians 15 means the whole of the fifteenth chapter of Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth.

Bear in mind that the titles and the chapter and verse divisions were not in the original documents. Sometimes the divisions are badly placed. Always check that these divisions do not interrupt the flow of thought.

EXTERNAL EVIDENCE

Little contemporary evidence has been preserved of events in the first century. Scarcely any official despatches from the provinces to Rome and none of Pontius Pilate's have been preserved. It is not surprising that none referring to the execution of Christ Jesus have survived.

However early Christian writers took it for granted that those records were available in the imperial archives of their time. In AD.150 Justin Martyr referred emperor Antoninus to "Acts recorded under Pontius Pilate" confirming that Christ Jesus was nailed to a gibbet and that the executioners divided and gambled for His clothes, exactly as predicted 1,000 years before by King David (Psalm 22.16 and 18). [First Apology. 35.7-9 Justin]

In about 52 AD a man named Thallus wrote a history of the Eastern Mediterranean world beginning with the Trojan war. In it he refers to the extended period of unnatural darkness mentioned in Matthew's account of the crucifixion (Matt.27:45), which was from mid-day to three in the afternoon. He suggests it was an eclipse. In the mid-third century a man named Julius Africanus pointed out that it could not have been an eclipse of the sun because the Jewish feast of the Passover was celebrated at the time of the full moon. [Page 1157, Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker II B (Berlin 1929) F.Jacoby]

MANUSCRIPT EVIDENCE

Academics call original manuscripts "autographs". We do not have autographs of any Bible documents. Neither is this surprising, as we do not have original documents of any classical writings of antiquity. However there are numerous early manuscript portions of the Bible, both in the original languages and in translations. There are also numerous quotations in early letters and other documents. All these verify that the text we have now is essentially the same as it was in those days. Differences that do exist are mostly minor scribal variants, not affecting the sense. None differ in any item of doctrine. No other works of antiquity have anywhere near the amount of ancient corroborative evidence as the Bible documents.

Old Testament Manuscripts

Amongst the Dead Sea Scrolls were found the oldest known Hebrew/Aramaic manuscripts of parts of the Old Testament. Every book is represented except Esther. They are all dated earlier than BC 100. They all substantiate the accuracy of the Masoretic Hebrew Text of circa AD 900. The "Septuagint" Greek translation of BC 285-246 also confirms the reliability of the Masoretic text. These documents also establish the existence of the predictions about the Lord Jesus and His church in the Hebrew/Aramaic scriptures long before the events occurred. Jews in the first century AD recognised as canonical, only those documents which are now in the Masoretic version of the Hebrew/Aramaic scriptures. (Against Apion 1:8, Josephus). Those were the documents which were regarded as inviolable scriptures by the Lord Jesus (e.g. Matthew 22:29). The "protestant"

Old Testament translations are based on those documents.

New Testament Manuscripts

The oldest most complete Greek manuscripts of the New Testament date from the fourth and fifth centuries. These help to confirm the authenticity of the text. Even so, this might seem a considerable amount of time after the events which they record. However scholars do not doubt the historicity of ancient books such as Homer's Iliad, Suetonius' De Vita Caesarum, Caesar's Gallic Wars, the Qur'an etc. despite the intervals between the earliest extant copies and the originals. For example the time gap between Homer (900 BC) and the oldest copy of his "Iliad" is some 500 years and that between Suetonius(AD75-160) and his "De Vita Caesarum" is about 800 years.

Copies of large portions of Greek New Testament documents date back to the third century and little known gospel fragments are now dated back to the first century. The papyrus fragment of John's Gospel, located in John Ryland's library, Manchester, is dated about AD 120. This establishes that the gospel according to John was written before then. The dating of the papyrus fragment of the gospel according to Luke in Paris (known as P69/ P75) is revised to early 2nd or maybe even 1st. century. Papyrus fragment 7Q5 of the gospel of Mark 6:52-53 which was found in a cave at Qumran, has been dated pre-AD 68. This takes us back to within 35 years of Jesus death, to the time when eyewitnesses of that event were still alive. So also does the "Magdalene Manuscript", a fragment from the book of Matthew chapter 26 which is dated pre-AD 70. These Matthew, Mark and Luke gospel papyri were penned in their lifetime! No other ancient documents have anywhere near this level of documentary support!

Internal Evidence

Several events in the late first century had a traumatic impact on the new Christian community. Of these were the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD, the great fire of Rome and the subsequent persecution of Christians and the martyrdom of Paul in AD 64. None of these events are recorded, or their occurrence alluded to in

any of the New Testament documents. This indicates that none of these documents were written after these events had occurred.

In them we have recorded eyewitness accounts, of events related exactly as they saw them. The Apostle Peter insisted "We did not follow cleverly contrived fables when we informed you of the masterliness and physical reality of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His grandeur." 2 Peter 1:16.

IN CONCLUSION

We have only scratched the surface of the evidence available. If you wish to look into these matters in more detail we recommend that you consult "The Jesus Papyrus" by Dr.Carsten Peter Thiede, the detailed reference work by Josh McDowell: "Evidence that Demands a Verdict" and the book "Redating the New Testament" by the clerical sceptic John A.T.Robinson.

Historical evidence does not prove a collection of books to be the inspired word of God. But evidence such as the foregoing does vindicate the authenticity of the Bible documents. On that basis the objective observer must accept them as historical documents, faithfully recording historical events. To say the least they should not be discounted out of hand. It follows that the claims made therein deserve serious and objective consideration. Conviction that we are handling the word of God comes from trust in the Lord Jesus engendered by the evidences related therein.

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