

The Christian Bible

Anyone beginning to study Christianity soon realizes that the Bible plays a very important role in Christian life and thought. If you attend a Christian service of worship, you will hear the Bible read publicly as an integral part of that worship. You will probably hear a sermon preached, based on one of the biblical passages read during the service. If you join a small group of Christians who meet for study and prayer, you may well find that their meetings include “Bible study” – that is, reflection on the meaning and relevance of a short passage from the Bible.

So what is this Bible? And why is it so important? In this chapter we shall explore the structure and contents of the Christian Bible and the role it plays for Christians.

The term “the Bible” is used by Christians to refer to the collection of writings that they regard as authoritative. Other ways of referring to this collection of texts are also used in Christian writings, such as the descriptions “Sacred Scripture” or “Holy Scripture.” However, the term “Bible” is the most widely used.

The unusual word “Bible” needs explanation. Like many words in modern English, it is the almost direct transliteration of a Greek original. The Greek word that has been taken into English is *biblia* – literally meaning “books.” The whole Greek phrase is in the plural (*ta biblia*, “the books”; singular *biblion*) and refers to the collection of books, or writings, brought together in the Bible.

So what sorts of books are gathered together in this way? And how are they arranged? In the next two sections of this chapter we shall explore the two groups of writings known as the “Old Testament” and “New Testament.”

Box 2.1 The books of the Bible

TITLE

Genesis
Exodus
Leviticus
Numbers
Deuteronomy
Joshua
Judges
Ruth
1 Samuel
2 Samuel
1 Kings
2 Kings
1 Chronicles
2 Chronicles
Ezra
Nehemiah
Esther
Job
Psalms
Proverbs
Ecclesiastes
Song of Songs
Isaiah
Jeremiah
Lamentations
Ezekiel
Daniel
Hosea
Joel
Amos
Obadiah
Jonah
Micah
Nahum
Habakkuk
Zephaniah
Haggai
Zechariah
Malachi

Box 2.1 The books of the Old Testament

TITLE	ABBREVIATION
Genesis	Gen
Exodus	Ex
Leviticus	Lev
Numbers	Num
Deuteronomy	Dt
Joshua	Jos
Judges	Jdg
Ruth	Ru
1 Samuel	1Sa
2 Samuel	2Sa
1 Kings	1Ki
2 Kings	2Ki
1 Chronicles	1Ch
2 Chronicles	2Ch
Ezra	Ezr
Nehemiah	Neh
Esther	Est
Job	Job
Psalms	Ps
Proverbs	Pr
Ecclesiastes	Ecc
Song of Songs	SoS
Isaiah	Is
Jeremiah	Jer
Lamentations	Lam
Ezekiel	Ez
Daniel	Dan
Hosea	Hos
Joel	Joel
Amos	Am
Obadiah	Ob
Jonah	Jon
Micah	Mic
Nahum	Nah
Habakkuk	Hab
Zephaniah	Zep
Haggai	Hag
Zechariah	Zec
Malachi	Mal

The Old Testament

The Christian Bible is divided into two major sections, traditionally referred to as the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament consists of 39 books, beginning with Genesis and ending with Malachi. It is almost entirely written in Hebrew, the language of Israel; however, some short sections are written in Aramaic, an international language widely used in the diplomacy of the ancient Near East. The Old Testament itself includes a number of different kinds of writings, of which the most important are the following:

- 1 **THE FIVE BOOKS OF THE LAW** These are sometimes also referred to as the Five Books of Moses, reflecting a traditional belief that they were largely written by Moses. In more scholarly works, they are sometimes referred to as the Pentateuch (from the Greek words for “five” and “bookcase”; *teuchos*). They are: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. These books deal with the creation of the world, the calling of Israel as a people, and its early history, including the exodus from Egypt. The story they tell ends with the people of Israel being about to cross over the Jordan and enter the promised land. One of the most important themes of these books is the giving of the Law to Moses and the implications of this act for the life of Israel.
- 2 **THE HISTORICAL BOOKS** Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther are “historical” books in that they deal with various aspects of the history of the people of God, from their entry into the promised land of Canaan to the return of the people of Jerusalem from exile in the city of Babylon. They include detailed accounts of the conquest of Canaan, the establishment of a monarchy in Israel, the great reigns of Kings David and Solomon, the breakup of the single nation of Israel into two parts (the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah), the destruction of Israel by the Assyrians, the defeat of Judah and the exile of its people, both caused by the Babylonians, and the final return from exile and rebuilding of the temple. The books are arranged in historical order.
- 3 **THE PROPHETS** This major section of the Old Testament contains the writings of a group of individuals understood to be inspired by the Holy Spirit who sought to make the will of God known to their people over a period of time. There are 16 prophetic writings in the Old Testament, which are usually divided into two categories. First, there are the four *major prophets*: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. These are followed by the twelve *minor prophets*: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. The use of the words “major” and “minor” does not imply any judgment about the relative importance of the prophets. It refers simply to the length of the books in question. The prophetic writings are arranged roughly in historical order.

Other types of book can be noted, for instance the “wisdom” writings: Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes. These works deal with the question of how true wisdom may be found, and they often provide some practical examples of wisdom.

From what has been said, it will be clear that the phrase "Old Testament" is used by Christian writers to refer to those books of the Christian Bible that were (and still are) regarded as sacred by Judaism. For Christians, the Old Testament is seen as setting the scene for the coming of Jesus, who brings its leading themes and institutions to fulfillment. The same texts, of course, continue to be held as sacred by Jews to this day. This means that the same collection of texts is referred to in different ways by different groups. This has stimulated a few proposals for alternative ways of referring to this collection of texts, none of which has gained general acceptance. Three main alternative names for the Old Testament may be noted.

- 1 THE HEBREW BIBLE This way of referring to the Old Testament stresses the fact that it was written in Hebrew and is sacred to the Hebrew people. However, it fails to do justice to the way in which Christianity sees an essential continuity between the Old and the New Testament. A minor difficulty is also caused by the fact that parts of the Old Testament are written in Aramaic rather than Hebrew.
- 2 THE FIRST TESTAMENT This way of referring to the collection of texts avoids using the word "old," which is held by some to be pejorative. "Old," it is argued, means "outdated" or "invalid." Referring to the Old Testament as the "First Testament" and the New as the "Second Testament" is held by some to emphasize the continuity between the two collections of texts.
- 3 TANAKH This is an acronym of the Hebrew words for "law, prophets, and writings" (*torah, nevi'im, ketuvim*), which is the standard Jewish description of the works that Christians call the "Old Testament." Tanakh is perfectly acceptable for Jewish use but does not reflect the specifically Christian understanding of the nature of the continuity between Israel and the church.

There is presently no generally accepted substitute within Christianity for the traditional phrase "Old Testament," which will therefore be used throughout this study. Nevertheless, readers should be aware of the alternatives and of the issues that led to their being proposed.

There are some disagreements within Christianity over exactly what is included in the Bible, which primarily focus on the Old Testament. The most important of these disagreements concerns a group of works usually referred to as "the Apocrypha" (from the Greek word for "covered, hidden") or as "the Deuterocanonical works." This category includes books such as the Wisdom of Solomon and the book of Judith. These books, although dating from the period of the Old Testament, were not originally written in the Hebrew language and are thus not included in the Hebrew Bible.

Protestants tend to regard these "apocryphal" books as interesting and informative, but not as being of doctrinal importance. Catholics and Orthodox Christians, on the other hand, regard them as an integral part of the text of the Bible. This difference is probably best reflected in the way in which Protestant and Catholic Bibles are laid out. Many Protestant Bibles do not include the Apocrypha at all. Those that do – such as the famous King James's Bible of 1611 – include these texts as a third section of the Bible. Catholic Bibles – such as the Jerusalem Bible – include them within the Old Testament section of the Bible.

Major Themes of the Old Testament

The Old Testament is a remarkably complex work, which merits much fuller study than is possible in this overview. If you have the time to take the study of the Old Testament further, you are strongly recommended to make use of one of the excellent introductions currently available (which are noted in the Further Reading section for this chapter). What follows is a very basic and brief introduction to some of the themes of the Old Testament.

The creation

The Old Testament opens with an affirmation that God created the world. The fundamental theme asserted in the opening chapters of the book of Genesis is that God is the originator of all there is in the world. No created thing can compare with God. This point is of particular importance, given the importance of worship of, for example, the sun or the stars among other religions of the ancient Near East. In the Old Testament, God is superior to everything in creation. The height of God's creation is declared to be humanity, which alone is created in the image and likeness of God. Humanity is understood to be the steward (not the possessor!) of God's creation and is entrusted with its care.

The account of the creation is followed by an account of the nature and origins of sin. One of the fundamental points made in Genesis 3 is that sin enters the world against God's intentions. Sin disrupts the close relationship between God and the creation; it leads to humanity rebelling against God and asserting its autonomy. This theme recurs throughout the Bible. For example, the story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11: 1–9) is basically about human attempts at self-assertion in the face of God. God's hostility to sin is depicted in a number of ways; the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden and Noah's flood are two of them.

So how important is the theme of creation to the Old Testament? In the twentieth century, the great Old Testament scholar Gerhard von Rad (1901–1971) argued that the most characteristic insight of the Old Testament was that its God was sovereign over history, especially the history of Israel. In the Old Testament, faith in God is primarily faith in a God who acts within, and is sovereign over, cosmic and human history. While von Rad is careful to stress that the faith of Israel included reference to creation, he believed that the primary emphasis lay on God bringing Israel out of Egypt and into Canaan. The doctrine of creation takes its place as a secondary doctrine, providing a certain context for the affirmation of divine lordship over history.

Abraham: Calling and covenant

The calling of Abraham is seen as being of foundational importance to the emergence of Israel, both as a nation and as the people of God. The central theme of God's calling of Abraham (Genesis 12: 1–4) carries the idea that God has chosen an individual whose descendants will possess the land of Canaan and will become a great nation. The theme of the fulfillment of this promise is of major importance throughout the Pentateuch. It is also of importance in the New Testament – to Paul, who sees Abraham's willingness to trust in the promises of God as a prototype of Christian faith.

The idea of a "covenant" between God and Abraham and his descendants is introduced at this point. The ritual of circumcision is seen as the external sign of belonging to the covenant of the people of God. For Paul, it is of particular importance that God's promise to Abraham precedes the external sign of this covenant; this, according to Paul, implies that the promise takes precedence over the sign. As a result, Gentiles (that is, those who are not ethnic Jews) do not require to be circumcised when they convert to Christianity.

The book of Genesis traces the fortunes of Abraham and his descendants, showing the manner in which the covenant between God and Abraham is realized. The book ends with an account of the way in which Abraham's descendants settle in the land of Egypt, thus setting the scene for the next major theme of the Old Testament.

The exodus and the giving of the Law

The story of the exodus (a word of Greek origin that literally means "exit" or "way out") is well known. A new ruler arises in Egypt (he is referred to as "Pharaoh"), who regards the descendants of Abraham as a potential threat. The identity of this Pharaoh is unknown, although there are good reasons for suggesting that he may have been Ramesses II (who ruled during the period 1279–1213 BC). He subjected the Hebrews to a series of oppressive measures designed to limit their numbers and influence. The book of Exodus describes God's call to Moses to be the liberator of Israel from its bondage in Egypt.

One of the most important Old Testament festivals is closely linked with the exodus from Egypt. The Passover festival began in the period before the exodus. The origins and purpose of the festival are described at Exodus 11: 1–12: 30. It marks an act of divine judgment against Egypt. The regulations for the marking of the festival are laid down with some precision. Each household or group of households in Israel is to sacrifice a perfect lamb or goat and to daub its blood across the sides and tops of the doorframes. This will mark off its inhabitants as God's own people and will distinguish them from their Egyptian oppressors. These people are then to eat a meal, in order to recall their time in Egypt. Part of the meal consists of "bitter herbs," which symbolize the bitterness of their bondage. Another major part of the meal is unleavened bread. This "bread made without yeast" points to the haste in which the people were asked to prepare to leave Egypt. There was not even enough time for dough to rise through the action of the yeast. The festival is named "the Lord's Passover," which refers to the fact that God will "pass over" the houses of his own people as he brings vengeance on the firstborn sons of the Egyptians. In commemoration of this act of deliverance, the Passover is to be celebrated every year as a "lasting ordinance." Further regulations concerning its celebration are mentioned later (Exodus 12: 43–49).

The theme of the covenant between God and Israel is developed further in the book of Exodus. Two particular points should be noted. First, a specific name is now used to refer to God. This is the term "Lord," which is the English word designed to translate a cypher of four letters that is used to name God specifically. This group of four letters, often referred to as the "Tetragrammaton" (from the Greek words for "four" and "letters"), is sometimes represented as "Yahweh" or "Jehovah" in English versions of the Bible. Other Hebrew words may be used to refer to gods in general; but the specific name "Lord" is used only to refer to the "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." Unlike other Hebrew words for "god," it is never

used for any other divine or angelic being. These other Hebrew words act as common nouns, designating “god” or “gods” in general, and can be used with reference to Israel’s own God or to other gods (such as the pagan gods of other nations). But the Tetragrammaton is used only in naming the specific God whom Israel knew and worshipped.

Second, the obligations that being the covenant people of God impose on Israel are made clear. This is a series of specific and unconditional demands, which are now usually referred to as the “Ten Commandments,” and which Moses received at Mount Sinai. These commandments continue to be of major importance within Judaism and Christianity alike, especially as Israel enters the promised land of Canaan and attempts to establish a society that is based on this covenant between God and the people.

After leaving Egypt, the people of Israel spend a period of 40 years wandering in the wilderness of Sinai, before finally crossing the Jordan River to enter the promised land of Canaan. The occupation of Canaan was seen as consolidating the distinctive identity of

Box 2.2 The Ten Commandments

- 1 I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.
- 2 You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.
- 3 You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.
- 4 Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work – you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.
- 5 Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.
- 6 You shall not murder.
- 7 You shall not commit adultery.
- 8 You shall not steal.
- 9 You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
- 10 You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor. (Exodus 20: 2–17)

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Figure 2.1

Israel. In particular, it established that the worship of the Lord and obedience to the covenant between the Lord and Israel were of central importance to the identity and wellbeing of people. The book of Joshua describes elaborate measures being taken to ensure that the

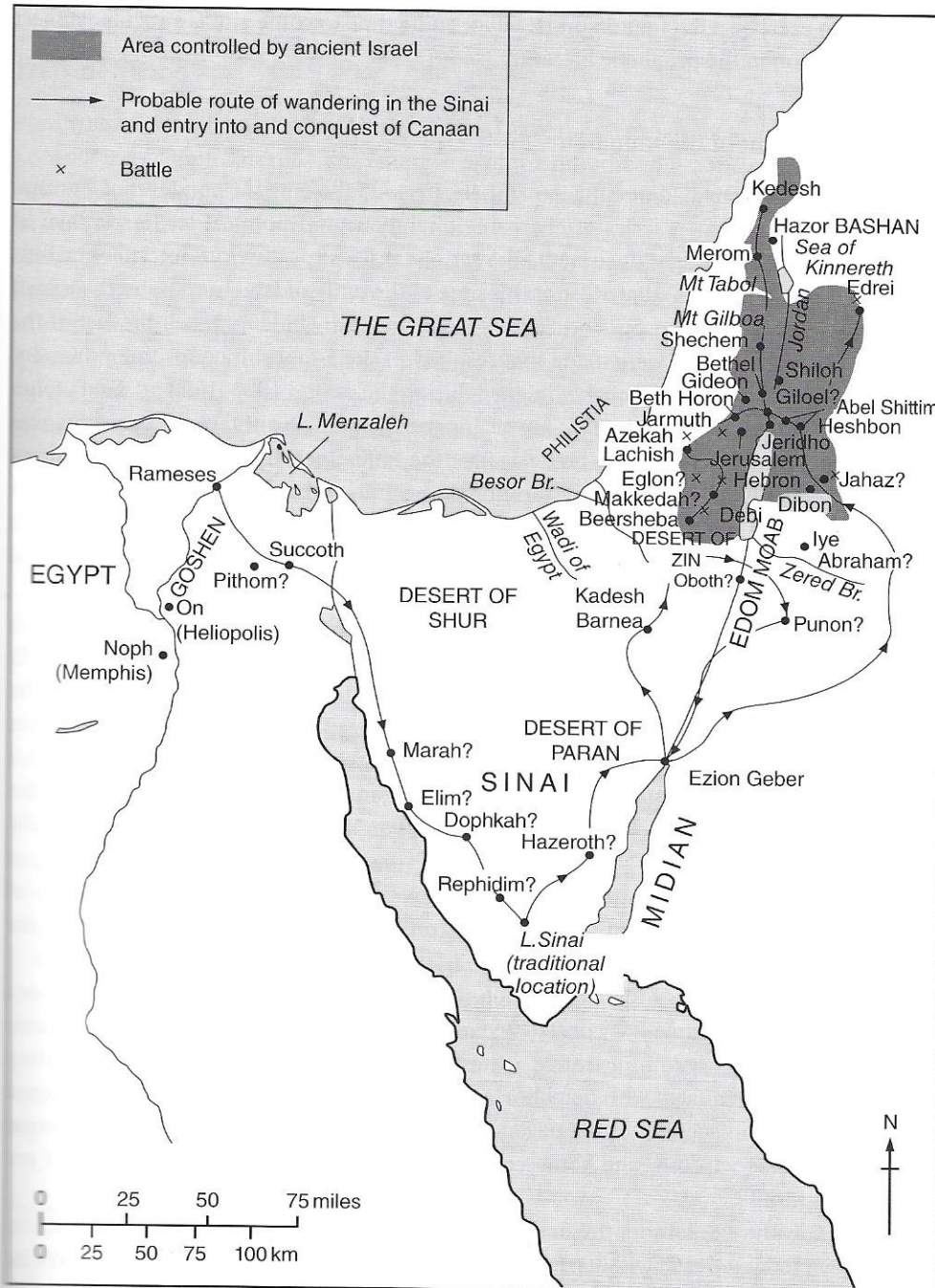


Figure 2.1 The route of Israel's exodus from Egypt and conquest of Canaan.

worship of the Lord was not in any way compromised by indigenous Canaanite religions. Canaanite religion was strongly oriented toward fertility issues – such as the fertility of the land, animals, and humans. Its major deities – including Baal and Ashtaroah – feature regularly in biblical accounts of the history of Israel over the next centuries. Canaanite religion continued to exercise a fascination on Israel for some time to come and is a regular subject of condemnation in the prophetic literature.

The establishment of the monarchy

In its early period Israel had no king. During the period following the conquest of Canaan, the region was ruled by a series of charismatic religious and political leaders known as “judges.” The book of Judges documents the serious threats (partly from internal disunity, partly from external forces) that arose at this time to the unity of Israel and notes the role of judges such as Gideon, Samson, and Samuel in this regard. Under Samuel, the last of the “judges,” a series of moves were made that resulted in the establishment of the monarchy. The first king was Saul, who probably reigned during the period 1020–1000 BC. Saul’s reign is portrayed as divisive and tragic. One of his most significant internal opponents was David. Following Saul’s death in a battle against the Philistines, David launched a military campaign that eventually led to the restoration of the unity of Israel and the expansion of its territory. Although opposition to David continued throughout his reign, particularly from the supporters of Saul, David was able to maintain his hold on the nation until the final years of his reign.

The reign of David (c. 1000–961 BC) saw significant developments taking place in Israel’s religion. David’s conquest of the city of Jerusalem led to its becoming the center of Israel’s religious life, a development that would be consolidated during the reign of Solomon. The role of the king became important religiously, as he was seen to be a son of God. The theme of a future successor to David, who would rule over a renewed people of God, became a significant element of messianic hopes within Israel and explains the importance of the “David” theme within parts of the New Testament. For New Testament writers (especially Matthew and Paul), Jesus of Nazareth is to be seen as the successor to David as king of Israel. Many Old Testament writings, particularly within the Psalter, extol the greatness of the king, the temple, and the city of Jerusalem (often referred to as “Zion”). All three are seen as tokens of God’s favor toward Israel.

David was succeeded as king by Solomon, who reigned during the period 961–922 BC. During his reign the temple was constructed as a permanent place of worship for the Lord. A strongly centralized administrative system was set in place and extensive trading agreements were negotiated with neighboring countries. Solomon’s extensive harem caused disquiet to some, on account of the pagan religious beliefs of some of his wives. Solomon was famed for his wisdom, and some collections of proverbs in the Old Testament are attributed to him.

After the death of Solomon, the nation of Israel proved unstable. Eventually the nation split into two sections, each with its own king. The northern kingdom, which would now be known as “Israel,” would eventually cease to exist under the Assyrian invasions of the eighth century. The southern kingdom of Judah, which retained Jerusalem as its capital city,

continued to exist until the Babylonian invasions of the sixth century. At this point the monarchy ended. Jewish hopes increasingly came to focus on the restoration of the monarchy and the rise of a new figure like David. From a Christian perspective, these expectations could be directly related to the coming of Jesus of Nazareth.

The priesthood

The centrality of religion to the identity of Israel gave the guardians of its religious traditions a particularly significant role. The emergence of the priesthood is a major theme in its own right. One of the most significant functions of the priesthood related to the cultic purity of Israel. This purity could be defiled (or "made unclean," as this type of occurrence is often described) by various forms of pollution. The priesthood was responsible for ensuring the cleanliness of the people, which was seen as being vital for the proper worship of the Lord.

More importantly, the priesthood was responsible for the maintenance of the sacrificial system, and particularly for the Day of Atonement ritual, in which sacrifices were offered for the sins of the people. A distinction is to be drawn between "uncleanliness" (which arises from natural bodily functions) and "sin" (which has strongly ethical overtones). Sin was seen as something that created a barrier between Israel and God. It is significant that most of the Old Testament images or analogies for sin take the form of images of separation. In order to safeguard the continuing relationship between the Lord and Israel, the priesthood was responsible for ensuring that the proper sacrifices were offered for sin.

A related theme is that of the temple. During the first period of its history, Israel used a movable tent or tabernacle for its religious rites. However, when David captured the Jebusite city of Jerusalem and made it his capital, he declared his intention to build a permanent place of worship for the Lord. This was actually carried out under the direction of his successor, Solomon. The splendor of the building is a frequent theme in Old Testament writings dating from around this period. The temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC and rebuilt after the return from exile, half a century later. The Second Temple (as the building erected by the returned exiles is known) appears to have been rather less magnificent. However, with the end of the monarchy, the temple came to have increased civil significance, in that temple authorities were responsible for both religious and civil matters.

A more splendid temple was constructed under Herod. Although work on this project appears to have begun in the decades immediately prior to the birth of Christ, the work was only completed in AD 64. The temple was destroyed, never to be rebuilt, during the suppression of a Jewish revolt against the Romans in the city in AD 70. The western wall of the temple largely survived; it is now widely referred to as "the wailing wall" and constitutes an important place of prayer for Jews to this day.

Prophecy

The English word "prophet" is generally used to translate the Hebrew word *nabi*, which is probably best understood as meaning "someone who speaks for another," or perhaps "a representative." The phenomenon of prophecy was widespread in the ancient Near East, not

restricted to the “prophets of the Lord.” The Old Testament refers to a number of “prophets of Baal” – charismatic individuals who claimed to act or speak on behalf of the Canaanite deity Baal. Early prophets of importance include Elijah and Elisha, both of whom were active during the ninth century BC. However, the most important period of prophetic activity focuses on the eighth to the sixth centuries BC and deals with the will of the Lord for Israel during a period of enormous political turbulence, which arose from the increasing power of Assyria and Babylonia. Prophets such as Jeremiah proclaimed a coming period of exile, which would be both a punishment for the past sins of the people and an opportunity for them to renew their religious practices and beliefs. After the period of exile in Babylon, post-exilic prophets such as Haggai and Malachi address some of the issues that came to be of importance as the returning exiles attempted to restore Jerusalem and its temple.

The prophets of Israel were seen as affirming the Lord’s continued commitment to and presence within Israel. Yet, with the ending of the classic period of prophecy, the Holy Spirit seemed to have ceased to operate. God came to be viewed in distant and remote terms. No longer was the “voice of God” heard within Israel. Even the most senior rabbis (or “teachers”) could expect to catch nothing more than an echo of the voice of God – an idea that was expressed in the technical phrase *bath qol* (literally, “the daughter of the voice”). The enormous interest in both John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth partly reflects this concern. Might the coming of these two figures signal the renewal of prophecy and the restoration of Israel? The account of the baptism of Jesus (see Mark 1: 10–11) clearly indicates that the coming of Jesus marks the inauguration of a period of renewed divine activity and presence.

Exile and restoration

One of the most important events recounted in the Old Testament is the exile of Jerusalem to Babylon in 586 BC. In 605 BC the Babylonian Emperor Nebuchadnezzar defeated the massed Egyptian armies at Carchemish, establishing Babylon as the leading military and political power in the region. Along with many other territories in this region, the land of Judah became subject to Babylonian rule, possibly in 604 BC.

Jehoiakim rebelled against Babylon. He may have been encouraged in this move by a successful Egyptian counterattack against Babylon in 601, which may have seemed to suggest that Babylon’s power was on the wane. It was a serious misjudgment. Judah was invaded by Babylonian forces, and Jerusalem was besieged. The king, the royal family, and the circle of royal advisors gave themselves up to the besieging forces early in 597 BC. They were deported to Babylon, along with several thousands of captives. A failed rebellion a few years later led to the deportation of most of the population of Jerusalem to Babylon. Jerusalem was left unpopulated and vulnerable, its temple desecrated.

The prophets of Israel interpreted this period of exile in the first place as a judgment against Judah, on account of its lapse into pagan religious beliefs and practices; and, in the second, as a period of national repentance and renewal that would lead to the restoration of a resurgent people of God. Following the conquest of Babylon in 539 BC by Cyrus, king of Persia (559–530 BC), the exiled inhabitants of Judaea were allowed to return to their homeland.

The return of the deported inhabitants of Jerusalem to their home city after decades of exile was seen by Old Testament writers as a demonstration of the faithfulness of the Lord and as an

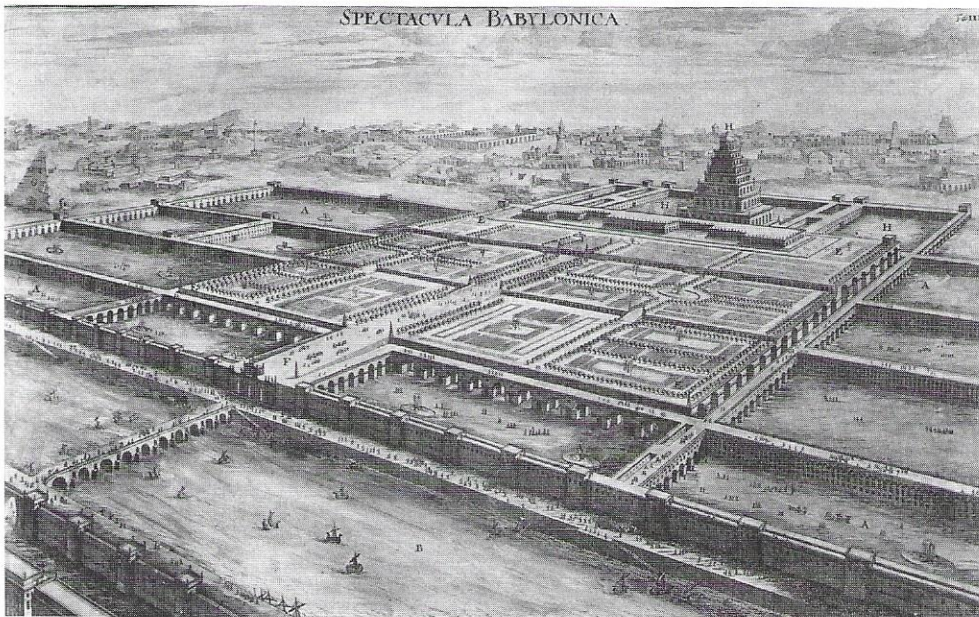


Figure 2.2 The Hanging Gardens of Babylon, one of the greatest wonders of the Ancient World; after Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach, c. 1700. Source: AKG Images.

Box 2.3 How to refer to passages in the Bible

How do you identify the biblical passage you want to study or talk about? To make this as easy as possible, a kind of shorthand way of referring to biblical passages has evolved over the centuries. To locate a verse in the Bible, you need to identify three things: the *book* of the Bible; the *chapter* of that book; and the *verse* of that chapter. To make sure you understand this, turn to the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 27, verse 1. What is the name of the centurion mentioned in this verse? If your answer is not “Julius,” check your reference again. Now try turning to Paul’s letter to the Romans, chapter 16, verse 5. Who was the first convert to Christ in Asia? If your answer is not “Epenetus,” check it again.

The above system is potentially cumbersome. Writing out everything – as in “Paul’s letter to the Romans, chapter 16, verse 5” – takes up too much space. So this entire formula is abbreviated as follows: Rom 16: 5. This is the standard form of reference, and it has the following features:

- 1 an abbreviation of the name of book of the Bible being referred to, usually two or three letters in length (such as 1Ki for “1 Kings,” Mt for “Matthew,” or 1Co for “1 Corinthians”);
- 2 the number of the chapter of that book, usually followed by a colon (:) or a full stop (.);
- 3 the number of the verse in that chapter.

There is no need to identify the writer of the book (such as Paul) or to state whether it is found in the Old or New Testament. All that is needed is these three parameters.

Having got used to referring to individual verses, we now need to explore how to refer to a passage of more than one verse. This is very simple. The reference "Mt 3: 13–17" points to the passage that begins at Mt 3: 13 and ends at Mt 3: 17. To indicate a passage within a single chapter of a biblical book, you need only include in the span the opening and the closing verse; the chapter itself is mentioned just once. But sometimes the passage will contain material from two or more chapters. In that case the numbers of the straddled chapters will feature on both sides of the dash. Here is an example of this kind: 1Th 4: 13–5: 11. This is a reference to a passage that begins at 1Th 4: 13 and ends at 1Th 5: 11.

Now that you are familiar with the basic aspects of this system, there are some minor points that need qualifying. First, some biblical books are so brief that they consist only of one chapter (Obadiah; Philemon; 2 John; 3 John; Jude). In this case, only the verse number is cited. Thus Phm 2 is a reference to the second verse of Philemon. Second, individual Psalms are treated as chapters of the Psalter. Thus a reference to Ps 23: 1 is a reference to the first verse of the twenty-third Psalm.

Finally, you will find that this system is not always followed in older books. Roman numerals, superscript numbers, and all kinds of punctuation may be used. To give you an idea of the variety, here are several such stylistic variants in the way of referring to Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, chapter 13, verse 14:

2Co 13: 14

II Cor. xiii.14

2 Cor 13.14

II Cor 13.14

affirmation of the repentance of the people of God. The temple was rebuilt and the religious cult re-established. The post-exilic writings of the Old Testament are notable for their emphasis on the need to maintain racial and religious purity and for the importance they attach to religious festivals as national events. Jerusalem had no king; the temple and its priests gradually came to assume most of the roles of the monarchy, including responsibility for civil matters.

The term "Jews" now began to be used to refer to the returned exiles (see, for example, Ezra 4: 23, 5: 1). Up until this time, the people of God had been referred to as "Israelites" or "Judahites." The term "Jew" comes to be used in the post-exilic period to designate the people of God, and will be used regularly in later writings for this purpose.

The New Testament

The New Testament consists of 27 books, which can be classified into a number of different categories – such as "gospels" and "letters." Their common theme is the identity and significance of Jesus, and this includes the practical and ethical implications of following him. Christians were proclaiming the words and actions of Jesus almost immediately after his death. Christian churches were being established in the eastern Mediterranean within a matter of years. The earliest written documents in the New Testament take the form of letters sent by

prominent Christians to these churches. Yet the preaching of the words and deeds of Jesus went on in the background. It was only at a later stage, probably in the early AD sixties, that the words and deeds of Jesus were committed to writing, in the form that we now know as “the gospels.” We shall begin our study of the New Testament by examining these works.

The gospels

The English word “gospel” comes from an Old English word *godspel* meaning “good news,” which was used to translate the Greek word *euangelion*. The word “gospel” is used in two different senses within Christianity. First, it refers to events that center on Jesus of Nazareth, which are seen as being good news for the world. The gospel is primarily the “good news” of the coming of Jesus of Nazareth, with all that this has to offer humanity.

Box 2.4 The books of the New Testament

BOOK	ABBREVIATION
Matthew	Mt
Mark	Mk
Luke	Lk
John	Jn
Acts	Ac
Romans	Rom
1 Corinthians	1Co
2 Corinthians	2Co
Galatians	Gal
Ephesians	Eph
Colossians	Col
1 Thessalonians	1Th
2 Thessalonians	2Th
1 Timothy	1Ti
2 Timothy	2Ti
Titus	Tit
Philemon	Phm
Hebrews	Heb
James	Jas
1 Peter	1Pe
2 Peter	2Pe
1 John	1Jn
2 John	2Jn
3 John	3Jn
Jude	Jud
Revelation	Rev

The term is also used in a secondary and derivative sense, to refer, en bloc, to the four writings that open the New Testament – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – and focus on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth (“the gospel”). Strictly speaking, these books should be referred to as “the gospel according to Matthew,” “the gospel according to Luke,” and so on – as they sometimes are. This mode of reference makes it clear that it is always the same “gospel” or “good news” that is being described, despite the different styles and approaches of the compilers of each of these four works.

The four “gospels” are best understood as four distinct yet complementary portraits of Jesus, seen from different angles and drawing on various sources. The first three share many features and are widely regarded as drawing on common sources in circulation within early Christian circles.

The gospel writers were not biographers – or even historians – by our standards, nor were they interested in providing a comprehensive account of everything that Jesus said and did. The gospel’s accounts of Jesus clearly contain a solid base of historical information. Nevertheless, this is linked with an *interpretation* of this information. Biography and theology are interwoven to such an extent that they can no longer be separated. The early Christians were convinced that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God, and their savior; and they believed that these conclusions should be passed on to their readers along with any

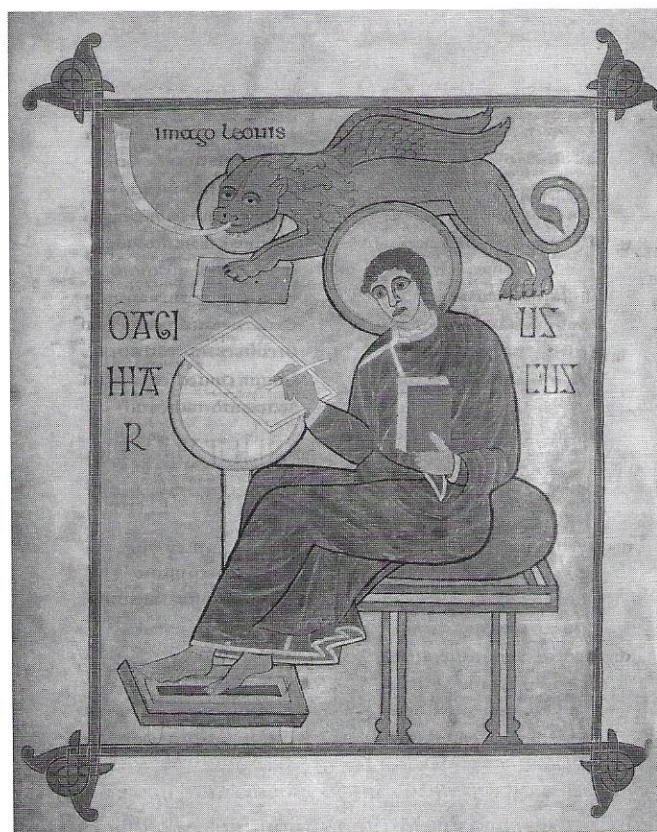


Figure 2.3 The gospel of Mark: a manuscript illumination from the Lindisfarne Gospels, c. 698–700. Manuscript illumination, Irish–Northumbrian, c. 698/700. Mark the Evangelist. From the Lindisfarne Gospels, written and illuminated by Bishop Eadfrith in Lindisfarne monastery. Source: British Library/AKG Images.

biographical details that helped cast light on them. For this reason, fact and interpretation are thoroughly intermingled in the gospels. To tell the story of Jesus involved explaining who he was and why he was so important. Interpretation of the significance of Jesus is therefore found alongside the historical material that is the basis of these theological conclusions.

The gospels were not written by Jesus himself, nor do they date from his lifetime. It is generally thought that Jesus was crucified around AD 30–33, and that the earliest gospel (probably Mark) dates from about AD 65. There is probably a gap of about thirty years between the time at which the events described in the gospels took place and the time at which they were first written down in the form of a gospel. By classical standards, this was a relatively short time. The Buddha, for example, had one thing in common with Jesus: he wrote nothing. Yet the definitive collection of his sayings (the Tripitaka) is thought to date from around four centuries after his death – more than ten times the interval between the death of Jesus and the appearance of the first gospel.

Even before Mark's gospel was written, Christians were committed to writing down their understanding of the importance of Jesus of Nazareth. The New Testament letters date mainly from the period AD 49–69 and provide confirmation of the importance of Jesus – as well as of interpretative work around him – in this formative period.

Some may find this gap of about thirty years puzzling. Why were these things not written down immediately? Might people not forget what Jesus said and did, or what happened at the crucifixion and resurrection? It is difficult for twentieth-century readers, who are so used to information being recorded in written or other visual form, to appreciate that the classical world – and this extends also to the archaic, Hellenistic, and late antique periods – communicated a lot more than us by means of the spoken word. The great Homeric epics, almost one thousand years before Jesus, are good examples of the way in which stories were passed on with remarkable accuracy from one generation to another. If there is one ability that modern westerners have probably lost, it is the ability to remember a story or narrative as it is told, and then to pass it on to others.

Studies of traditional cultures, including the period of the New Testament, have shown how the passing down of stories from one generation to another was characteristic of the entire premodern era. Indeed there are excellent grounds for arguing that early educational systems were based upon learning by rote. The fact that most people in the West today find it difficult to commit even one narrative to memory naturally tends to prejudice them against believing that anyone could ever do it. Yet the recitation of narratives that were held to be important to a community's history or understanding of its own identity appears to have been routine in more traditional cultures.

The period between the death of Jesus of Nazareth and the writing of the first gospel is usually referred to as the "period of oral tradition," meaning the period in which accounts of Jesus' birth, life, and death, as well as his teaching, were passed down with remarkable accuracy from one generation to another. In this period it seems that certain of Jesus' sayings and certain aspects of his life, especially those connected to his death and resurrection, were singled out as being of particular importance and were passed down from the first Christians to those who followed them. Other things were not passed down and have been lost forever. The early Christians seem to have identified what was essential and what was not in Jesus' words, deeds, and fate and transmitted to us only what pertained to the former class.

The period of oral tradition may thus be regarded as a period of sifting, in which the first Christians assessed the data and decided what needed to be set down for those who followed them. In this process of transmission, some of Jesus' sayings may have become detached from their original context and perhaps on occasion even acquired a new one, as a result of the uses to which the first Christians put them – which were, in the main, to proclaim the gospel to those outside the early community of faith and to deepen and inform the faith of those inside it.

The gospel of John – sometimes referred to as the “Fourth Gospel,” in order to emphasize its distinct literary character – differs from the three synoptic gospels in several respects. Probably written in Asia Minor around AD 90, this gospel does not include much of the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth found in the synoptic gospels – such as the parables of the kingdom, or the Lord's Prayer. Some scholars suggest that the work is structured around seven “signs,” pointing to the true identity and significance of Jesus.

Some other works purporting to be gospels were in circulation in the early church. These are generally regarded as originating from groups with particular agendas. The gospel of Judas, for example, is a relatively late document, almost certainly originating from a marginalized sect within Christianity that was convinced that everyone else had got Jesus of Nazareth seriously wrong. No documentary evidence within the body of literature accepted by Christians as authoritative at the time (and that body included some works that never made it into the New Testament canon) supported the case that this particular group wished to make. Its members remedied this situation by writing their own gospel. Only Judas *really* understood Jesus, we are told; the other disciples got him wrong and passed on hopelessly muddled accounts of his significance.

The gospel of Judas portrays Jesus of Nazareth as a spiritual guru similar to the gnostic teachers of the second and third centuries; this portrait bears little relation to the one found in the synoptic gospels. Christianity becomes a kind of mystery cult, in which Jesus of Nazareth has been reinvented as a gnostic teacher with gnostic ideas. The gospel of Judas has indeed the potential to illuminate our understanding of gnosticism in the mid-second century and beyond, especially its often noted parasitic relationship with existing world-views. But it seems to have nothing historically credible to tell us of the origins of Christianity or of the identity of Jesus of Nazareth.

The New Testament letters

The New Testament includes a series of letters written to individuals or churches by leading figures of the early church. These letters often clarify points of Christian doctrine and practice and offer encouragement to Christians in the face of hostility from other religious groupings or from the secular authorities. It is clear, for example, that Christianity was subject to various forms of harassment from Jews in the first decades of its existence. It must be remembered that, for much of the first century, Christianity was numerically very weak and was often forced to hold its meetings in secret, for fear of persecution from the local Roman authorities. In particular, the reigns of Nero and Domitian witnessed concerted efforts to eliminate the growing Christian church; some documents in the New Testament are written in the face of this kind of situation.

By far the largest collection of letters in the New Testament is attributed to Apostle Paul. According to the New Testament, Paul (initially known as "Saul") was a Jew and a native of Tarsus, the capital city of the Roman province of Cilicia, who had been hostile toward Christianity to begin with and had approved of Jewish attempts to suppress it. Then Paul underwent a dramatic conversion while on the road to Damascus (Acts 9: 1–31), and this led to his becoming one of the early Christian movement's most important advocates. His Jewish origins are reflected in the seriousness with which he engaged the question of Christianity's relation to Judaism.

Some scholars ask whether all the letters attributed to Paul in the New Testament were actually written by him. The letters to the Ephesians and Colossians show stylistic differences from Paul's earlier writings, which, some suggest, would point to a different author. Others suggest that Paul's style may have changed over time, or that these letters were written on behalf of Paul – or perhaps dictated by him – with occasional interpolations.

During the course of his three missionary journeys in Southeastern Europe, Paul established a number of small Christian groups in Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece. He subsequently remained in touch with some of them, by letter. Not all of these letters have survived; Paul himself makes reference to other letters to the church at Corinth and to a letter to the church at Laodicea. The use of the term "church" here is potentially misleading; early Christians did not meet in buildings designated as "churches," they gathered in secret in small groups. The word "church" is probably better translated as "congregation" or "gathering" in this context. Paul's early letters are often concerned with matters of doctrine, particularly the second coming of Christ and the relation between Jews and Gentiles. The later letters reflect the increasing importance of church order and structure, as Christianity was growing into a permanent presence in the eastern Mediterranean region.

The fixing of the New Testament canon

The Christian Bible is a collection of 66 books, of which 39 are found in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament. But how were the contents of the Bible decided upon? By what process were the 66 books of the Bible selected? At a fairly early stage in its history, the Christian church had to make some important decisions as to what "Scripture" actually designated. The patristic period witnessed a process of decision making in which limits to the New Testament were laid down – a process usually known as "the fixing of the canon."

The technical term "canon" derives from the Greek word *kanōn*, meaning "rule," "standard," or "fixed reference point." The phrase "the canon of Scripture" thus refers to a limited and defined group of writings that are accepted as authoritative within the Christian church. The term "canonical" is used to refer to scriptural writings accepted to be within the canon. Thus the Gospel of Luke is considered "canonical," whereas the Gospel of Thomas is considered "extra-canonical" (that is, lying outside the canon of Scripture).

However, within a short period, early Christian writers (such as Justin Martyr) were referring to "the New Testament" (to be contrasted with the "Old Testament") and insisting that both were to be treated with equal authority. By the late second century, when Irenaeus was writing, it was generally accepted that there were four canonical gospels, and there was a widespread consensus that these four gospels, together with Acts and various letters, had

the status of inspired Scripture. Thus Clement of Alexandria recognized four gospels, Acts, 14 letters of Paul (the letter to the Hebrews being regarded as Pauline), and Revelation; and Tertullian in the early third century declared that alongside the “law and the prophets” were the “evangelical and apostolic writings,” which were both to be regarded as authoritative within the church.

Gradually agreement was reached on the list of books that were recognized as inspired Scripture and on the order in which they were to be arranged. This process of reception did not involve the arbitrary authoritarian imposition of the views of influential bishops or churches. It was a gradual process of reflection and consultation, in which a consensus as to which writings were to be regarded as authentic and helpful gradually emerged within Christian communities. In AD 367 the influential Greek Christian writer Athanasius circulated a letter that summed up this consensus by identifying the 27 books of the New Testament (as we now know it) as being canonical. Athanasius was not imposing his own views at this point but reporting the views of the church as a whole – views that he clearly expected his readers to take very seriously. Christianity has always stressed the importance of the *consensus fidelium* (“agreement of the faithful”), and the formation of the canon is an excellent example of this gradual movement toward the emergence of such a consensus within the Christian movement throughout the Mediterranean area.

A number of criteria played a role in deciding whether a given writing was to be accepted as “canonical” or not. Three of the most important considerations in evaluating claims to canonicity of writings were:

- 1 *Their apostolic origins or connections* Were they to be attributed to, or based upon, the preaching and teaching of the first generation of apostles or those in their immediate circle? Some were clearly works of the apostles – for instance the letters of Peter and Paul. In other cases, such as the letter to the Hebrews, things were not quite so straightforward. This criterion was of major importance in the second century, when the church had to defend itself in the face of attacks from various groups, each claiming to have an “authoritative” revelation of its own.
- 2 *The extent to which they had secured general acceptance within Christian communities throughout the region* Individual churches were moving toward agreement as to which texts were to be regarded as authoritative. While there were inevitably disagreements over certain texts, the process of fixing the canon can be seen as “crystallizing” this consensus. Eusebius of Caesarea, who wrote in the early part of the fourth century, no longer used the criterion of apostolic authority, which had been so important to writers of the second century. For Eusebius, the issue was the reception of a book. In other words, was the book quoted by early and “orthodox” church fathers? The debate had clearly moved on – namely from apostolic credentials to reception within the global Christian community.
- 3 *The extent to which they were used in the liturgy* One of the main uses of the Bible was in Christian worship. An important criterion for canonicity was thus the extent to which a book was used liturgically – that is, read publicly when early Christian communities gathered for worship. This practice is already referred to in the New Testament: “And when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea” (Colossians 4: 16).

This process of determining the canonical works of the New Testament was not always an easy or straightforward one. There was debate, especially around a number of books. The western church had hesitations about including the letter to the Hebrews, because it was not specifically attributed to an apostle; the eastern church had reservations about the book of Revelation (sometimes also referred to as "the Apocalypse"). Four of the smaller books (2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Jude) were often omitted from early lists of New Testament writings. Some writings, which are now outside the canon, were regarded favorably within some sections of the church, although they ultimately failed to gain universal acceptance as canonical. Examples include the first letter of Clement, an early bishop of Rome who wrote around AD 96, and the *Didache*, a short early Christian manual on morals and church practices probably dating from the first quarter of the second century.

The arrangement of the material was also subject to considerable variation. Agreement was reached at an early stage that the gospels should have the place of honor within the canon, being followed by the Acts of the Apostles. The eastern church tended to place the seven "catholic epistles" or "general letters" (that is, James, 1 and 2; Peter, 1, 2 and 3; John; and Jude) before the 14 Pauline letters (Hebrews being accepted as Pauline), whereas the western church placed Paul's letters immediately after Acts and made the catholic letters follow them.

The Christian Understanding of the Relation of the Old and New Testaments

Texts are open to multiple interpretations. Christianity offers a specific reading of the Old Testament, which differs from that offered by Jewish readers and scholars. This is reflected in many ways, including in the understanding of the phrase "Old Testament" itself. As we noted in an earlier section, early Christians used this phrase to express the theological framework within which these texts were to be read. History was divided into the periods of the "Old Covenant" between God and Israel and the "New Covenant" between God and all of humanity. The Christian notions of an "Old Testament" and a "New Testament" are strongly theological in nature, in that they express the belief that the contents of the Old Testament belong to a period of God's dealings with the world that has been fulfilled through the coming of Christ in the New Testament.

From a Christian perspective, the collection of writings described as the "Old Testament" refers to the history of God's actions in the world – actions undertaken in preparation for the coming of Jesus Christ. Christians regard the New Testament as an extension of the same pattern of divine activity and presence as that declared in the Old, so that the New Testament both *continues* and *extends* the witness to the words and deeds of the God of Israel.

This way of thinking is reflected in the New Testament. New Testament writers clearly saw themselves as continuing the history of salvation narrated in the Old Testament. Matthew's gospel, for example, brings out the continuity between Jesus and Moses, the gospel and the Law, and the church and Israel. Paul's letters often focus on the continuity between the faith of Christians and that of Abraham. The letter to the Hebrews provides what is virtually a point by point comparison between Christianity and Judaism, stressing

both the continuity between them and the way in which Christianity brings to perfection the themes of the Old Testament.

The coming of Jesus of Nazareth is thus seen as fulfilling the hopes of the people of Israel. Jesus did not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets but to fulfill it (Matthew 5: 17). This helps us understand the extraordinary amount of engagement with the Old Testament that we find in the New Testament. On a conservative reading of the New Testament, there are at least 300 specific references to texts from the Old Testament, and more than 2,000 allusions to Old Testament texts or themes.

Yet, despite this emphasis on continuity with the old covenant, the New Testament understands the coming of Jesus of Nazareth as inaugurating something *new*. For example, full membership of the people of God is no longer considered to be determined by a person's ethnic origins but by his or her faith. Race no longer determines religious identity; Jews and Gentiles have equal status within the people of God, on the basis of their faith and common possession of the Holy Spirit. Similarly, the food laws and cultic observances of the Old Testament are no longer regarded as binding on Christians, because Christ has fulfilled the demands of the law and has declared all foods to be clean.

New Testament writers did not see these developments as a distortion of the meaning or intention of the Old Testament; rather they saw them as its intended outcome. Paul's letters are of particular importance in developing this theme. For example, Paul argues that the Old Testament understands Abraham as the father of all those who believe, not just as a patriarch of Israel (Romans 4: 9–17; Galatians 3: 6–9). Fulfillment of the proper intention of the Old Testament required cultic, theological, and spiritual redirection. Christianity thus provided a framework for the rereading of the Old Testament, allowing its proper meaning to be discerned and implemented.

Not all Christians were happy with this close relationship between the Christian faith and Judaism. The second-century writer Marcion of Sinope, who was excommunicated in the year 144, argued that the Old Testament concerned a religion that had nothing to do with Christianity. According to Marcion, Christianity was a religion of love that had no place whatsoever for law. The Old Testament relates to a different god than the New; the Old Testament's god, who merely created the world, was obsessed with the idea of law and seemed predisposed to use violence excessively. The New Testament's god, however, redeemed the world and was concerned with love. Marcion argued that Jesus of Nazareth came in order to depose the Old Testament's god and usher in the worship of the true God of grace. A similar teaching was associated with the Manicheans, who had a significant influence on the leading Christian writer Augustine of Hippo (354–430) during his younger period.

In refuting the Manichean view of the Old Testament as an embarrassment or irrelevance, Augustine argued that it was necessary to see the Old Testament in the light of the New in order to appreciate its full significance and importance for Christians. Augustine's views are set out succinctly in his famous dictum: "The New Testament lies hidden in the Old, and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New." Gregory the Great took this a stage further, remarking that "the Old Testament is a prophecy of the New Testament; and the best commentary on the Old Testament is the New Testament."

The majority position within Christian theology has followed Augustine and Gregory. On the one hand, it emphasizes the *continuity* between the two testaments; on the other, it

notes the *distinction* between them. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992) provides a particularly clear statement of this approach, drawing as it does on the idea of a “typological” reading of the Old Testament. A “type” (Greek *typos*) is a person, thing, or action that precedes and prefigures a greater person, thing, or action – such as the coming of Jesus Christ.

The Church, as early as apostolic times, and then constantly in her Tradition, has illuminated the unity of the divine plan in the two Testaments through typology, which discerns in God’s works of the Old Covenant prefigurations of what he accomplished in the fullness of time in the person of his incarnate Son. Christians therefore read the Old Testament in the light of Christ crucified and risen. Such typological reading discloses the inexhaustible content of the Old Testament; but it must not make us forget that the Old Testament retains its own intrinsic value as revelation reaffirmed by our Lord himself.

The Translation of the Bible

The Bible is written in the classical languages of the ancient world – Hebrew, Greek, and, to very limited extent, Aramaic. So what is a modern western reader of the Bible, unable to read any of these languages, meant to do? Unlike the Muslim Qu’ran, which, as tradition insists, should be read in the original classical Arabic language, the Bible, as most Christians accept, can be published and read in the language that ordinary people can understand. In the twenty-first century most Christian denominations have produced vernacular translations of the Bible for their members, aiming to render the original biblical texts in accessible and engaging ways.

This process can be illustrated from most modern European languages and is especially important in the case of English. Although demands for the Bible to be translated into the vernacular became particularly significant in the sixteenth century, they can be traced back much further. One of those who pressed most vigorously for an English version of the Bible in the fourteenth century was John Wycliffe (c. 1330–1384), widely hailed as a champion of biblical translation. Wycliffe argued that the English people had a right to read the Bible in their own language rather than be forced to listen to what their clergy wished them to hear in Latin – the language of the church, which ordinary people did not understand. As Wycliffe pointed out, the ecclesiastical establishment had considerable vested interests in not allowing the laity access to the Bible. Its members might even discover that there was a massive discrepancy between the lifestyles of bishops and clergy and those commended – and practiced! – by Jesus of Nazareth and the apostles.

In practice, one of the most influential biblical translations of the Middle Ages was the “Vulgate” – a Latin translation of both the Old and New Testaments, which was finalized in the twelfth century. Latin was at the time the language used by the church and scholars throughout Western Europe. As a result, this translation achieved considerable influence, even though it is now known to be inaccurate at several points.

As it happens, the translations that Wycliffe inspired – we are not sure how much translation work he himself actually carried out – were not based on the original Greek and Hebrew texts of the Bible, but on this standard medieval “Vulgate.” In other words Wycliffe was translating into English a Latin translation. But what if the Vulgate translation was inaccurate?

This question came to be of considerable importance during the sixteenth century, when the famous scholar Erasmus of Rotterdam criticized the inaccuracy of the Vulgate. Erasmus pointed out that this version translated the opening words of Jesus' ministry (Matthew 4: 17) as "do penance, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand." The translation suggested that the coming of the kingdom of heaven had a direct connection with the sacrament of penance. Erasmus pointed out that the Greek text should be translated as "repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand." Where the Vulgate seemed to refer to an outward practice (the sacrament of penance), Erasmus insisted that the text spoke of an inward psychological attitude – that of "being repentant."

These demands were taken up again by Martin Luther in the 1520s. Luther insisted that lay people should have the right to read and interpret the Bible for themselves. Why did the Bible have to be locked away from the people, imprisoned in the fetters of a dead language that only a charmed circle could read? Why could not educated lay people be allowed to read the Bible for themselves, in their own languages? Having realized

the need for such a translation, Luther decided that the task was too important to leave to anyone else. He would do it himself – and he translated the New Testament directly from the original Greek into everyday German.

William Tyndale followed Luther's lead and published the first English translation of the New Testament directly from the original Greek text; he did so anonymously, in 1526. Although Tyndale had hopes to translate the entire Bible into English, he managed only a few Old Testament books – from Hebrew. In the event, the first English translation of the complete Bible to be printed – the Coverdale Bible – appeared in 1535. It was followed by the more accurate Matthews Bible of 1537 and by the Great Bible of 1539. In 1560, a group of English émigrés based in Calvin's city of Geneva produced a particularly good translation, accompanied by illustrations and marginal notes. This rapidly became the favorite Bible of English-speaking Protestants.

However, the world's best-known English translation of the Bible dates from the early seventeenth century. In 1604 James I commissioned a new translation. More than fifty scholars were assembled for the task, working at Westminster, Oxford, and Cambridge. In 1611 the fruit of their labors was finally published. This new translation – generally known as the "Authorized Version" or the "King James Version" of the Bible – would achieve the status of a classic, becoming the standard and most widely used English translation of the Bible until the end of World War I in 1918.

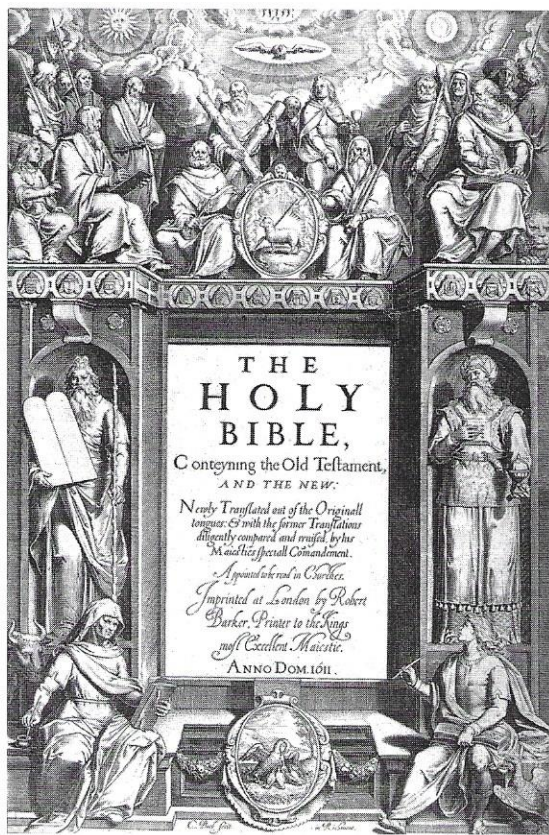


Figure 2.4 The frontispiece to the King James Bible of 1611, widely regarded as the most influential English translation of the Bible. *The Holy Bible*, published by Robert Barker, 1611. Source: Alamy.

The King James Version of the Bible was an outstanding translation by the standards of 1611 and beyond. Yet translations eventually require revision – not necessarily because they are defective, but because the language itself into which they are made changes over time. Translation involves aiming at a moving target, which has accelerated over the centuries. English is developing more quickly today than at any time in its previous history. Some words have ceased to be used; others have changed their meanings. Many words used by King James's translators have now changed their meaning. Their version can be misleading, simply because the English of 1611 is not the English of the twenty-first century. For example, consider the sentence: "For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep" (1 Thessalonians 4: 15). A modern reader would find this puzzling, mostly because the 1611 meaning of the word "prevent" does not correspond to its modern sense. For King James's translators, "prevent" meant what we now understand by "precede" or "go before" – not "hinder," which is the modern sense of "prevent." Given the fact that linguistic change such as this means that the King James Bible has the potential to mislead and confuse, there is a clear case for revising the translation. The extent of that revision is a matter for discussion; the need is beyond doubt. When a translation requires explanation, it has ceased to function as a working translation.

There is no difficulty here. All living languages, including English, change over the years. Linguistic development is simply a sign of life – it means that a language is being used and adapted to new situations. The task of translating is ongoing, not completed once and for all. Any modern translation of the Bible – whether into English, Swahili, or Mandarin – must be seen as provisional, requiring amendment as the language undergoes change and development. Translation is a never-ending task.

Debates over the correct translation of the Bible continue to this day. Yet there are other debates within Christianity over how to use the Bible. One of the most important of these discussions concerns whether the Bible stands on its own or needs to be read in the light of "tradition." In what follows we shall consider this matter further.

The Bible and Tradition

A series of controversies in the early church brought home the importance of the concept of tradition. The word "tradition" comes from the Latin term *traditio*, which means "handing over," "handing down," or "handing on." It is a thoroughly biblical idea; we find St. Paul reminding his readers that he was handing on to them core teachings of the Christian faith that he himself had received from other people (1 Corinthians 15: 1–4).

The term "tradition" can refer both to the action of passing teachings on to others – something that, Paul insists, must be done within the church – and to the body of teachings that are passed on in this manner. Tradition can thus be understood as a process as well as as a body of teaching. In particular, the Pastoral Epistles – three later New Testament letters that are particularly concerned with questions of church structure and with the transmission of Christian teaching (1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus) – stress the importance of "guarding the good deposit which was entrusted to you" (2 Timothy 1: 14). The New Testament also

uses the notion of “tradition” in a negative sense, meaning something like “human ideas and practices that are not divinely authorized.” Thus Jesus of Nazareth was openly critical of certain human traditions within Judaism (e.g., see Matthew 15: 1–6; Mark 7: 13).

The importance of the idea of tradition first became obvious in a gnostic controversy that broke out during the second century. The controversy centered on a number of questions, including how salvation was to be achieved. (The word “gnostic” derives from the Greek noun *gnōsis*, “knowledge,” and refers to belief in certain secret ideas that had to be known in order for individuals to secure salvation.) Christian writers found themselves having to deal with some highly unusual and creative interpretations of the Bible. How were they to deal with these? If the Bible was to be regarded as authoritative, was every interpretation of it to be treated as of equal value with any other?

Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130–c. 200), one of the church’s greatest early theologians, did not think so. The question of how the Bible was to be interpreted was of the greatest importance. Heretics, he argued, interpreted the Bible after their own taste. Orthodox believers, in contrast, interpreted the Bible in ways that their apostolic authors would have approved. The apostles passed on to their successors both the biblical texts and a certain way of reading and understanding them.

Everyone who wishes to perceive the truth should consider the apostolic tradition, which has been made known in every church in the entire world. We are able to number those who are bishops appointed by the apostles, and their successors in the churches to the present day, who taught and knew nothing of such things as these people imagine.

Irenaeus’ point is that a continuous stream of Christian teaching, life, and interpretation can be traced from the time of the apostles to his own period. The church is able to point to those who have maintained the teaching of the church, and to standard public creeds that set out the main lines of Christian belief. Tradition is thus the guarantor of faithfulness to the original apostolic teaching and a safeguard against innovations and misrepresentations of biblical texts such as the gnostics would introduce.

This development is of major importance, as it underlies the emergence of “creeds” – public, authoritative statements of the basic points of the Christian faith, which are based upon the Bible but avoid maverick interpretations of biblical material. The creeds thus provide a framework – a “rule of faith” (*regula fidei* in Latin) – setting out the right interpretation of the Bible. Their emergence was stimulated by two important factors:

- 1 the need for public statements of faith that represented the church’s interpretation of the Bible and could be used in teaching and in defending the Christian faith against misrepresentations;
- 2 the need for personal “confessions of faith” at the time of baptism.

We have already touched on the first point; the second needs further exploration. It is known that the early church attached special importance to the baptism of new members. In the third and fourth centuries, a definite pattern of instruction and baptism developed: new members of the church were instructed in the basics of the Christian faith during the

period of Lent and baptized on Easter Day. These new members of the church were asked to confirm their faith by assenting to key statements of Christian belief.

According to the *Apostolic Tradition*, a work written by Hippolytus of Rome (died c. 236) in the early years of the third century, three questions were put to each baptismal candidate: "Do you believe in God, the Father Almighty? Do you believe in Jesus Christ, our Savior? Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy church, and the forgiveness of sins?" As time went on, these questions were gradually changed into a statement of faith, which each candidate was asked to make.

The most important creed to emerge from these "baptismal creeds" is the Apostles' Creed, which is widely used in Christian worship today. Traditionally this creed is set out as twelve statements, each of which is attributed to one of the twelve apostles. Although it is now widely agreed that this creed was not actually written by the apostles themselves, it is nevertheless "apostolic" in the sense that it contains the main ideas of the Christian faith that the church received from the apostles. The Apostles' Creed offers a very convenient summary of some of the main topics of the Christian faith, and we shall use it as a basis for our discussion of the leading beliefs of Christianity in the following chapter.