

Our Bible's Heritage

TODAY MANY BELIEVERS in the Holy Bible are not aware of the historical origin of their Bible. We may have read and studied the books of the Bible, but that does not mean we know the historicity of what we are reading. It may therefore be prudent and interesting to consider the facts as we have uncovered them today through the scrutiny of modern historical research.

Let us begin with the books of Jewish Scripture from the Christian perspective. The Christian term “Old Testament” refers to the body of old Jewish records that comprise part of our modern Bible. While Protestants and Catholics do not agree precisely as to the number of records to be included in the canon of the “Old Testament,” all Christians use the term in contradistinction to the “New Testament,” which contains writings pertaining to Jesus Christ and His influence.

The term “Pentateuch” is sometimes used by scholars. It is a Greek term meaning the “Five Books.” These are the first five books of our Old Testament; i.e., Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. They contain a semi-historical and legendary narrative of the history of the world from the Creation to the time of the arrival of Jews in the Promised Land. There are in them some beautiful idylls, but there are also stories of incest, fraud, cruelty and treachery, not always explicitly disapproved of. A great part of the Mosaic Law is embodied in this narrative. The books are traditionally ascribed to Moses, but it is almost certain that they were not written in an age contemporary with Moses or within a span of time



Oil on canvas. Philippe de Champaigne (1602-1674).Milwaukee Art Museum
Moses Presenting the Tablets of Law

close to his era (some liberal historians view Moses as an altogether mythical figure—a view not shared by your author). They were in their present form most likely compiled sometime after the return of the Jews from the Babylonian Captivity! The decree of Cyrus permitting this return was in 536 B.C. Some books now included in the Old Testament, such as Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, were admittedly written after the return from Captivity, Malachi being as late as 420-397 B.C. The compilers of the Pentateuch obviously used some ancient material, and some of that material is expressly named. Egyptian and Chaldean terms are relics of local color and derive from more contemporary documents.

But there are some ludicrous slips, which show that the compilers did not always comprehend their material. Modern criticism distinguishes two distinct sources among the documents of different

dates used by the editors. For the sake of brevity and convenience they may be called J (Jehovistic) and E (Elohistic). Then there are later, rather obvious miscellaneous interpolations; these sometimes overlap and even contradict each other. Logically speaking, the Book of Joshua, which describes the entry into the Promised Land, should be bracketed with the Pentateuch, and many writers speak of the six books together as the Hexateuch.

The Apocrypha contains certain Books which are not admitted as Canonical in the English Bible. But the early Christians received them as part of the Jewish Scriptures, and the Council of Trent (A.D. 1545-1563) seems to have recognized the greater part of them as canonical. The statement in 2 Esdras (about the first century A.D.) that the law was burnt and Ezra (about 458-457 B.C.) was inspired to rewrite it, is probably true as to the historical fact that the law was lost, and that what we have now dates no earlier than the time of Ezra, and some of it a good deal later.

The view of the Jews regarding Scripture is somewhat different from that of the Christians. They divide their Scripture into three parts: (1) the Law or "Torah"; (2) the Prophets or "Nevi'im"; and (3) the Writings or "Ketubim." This division was probably current in the time of Jesus. In Luke 24:4 Jesus refers to the Law, the Prophets, and Psalms. In other places (e.g., Matt. 7:12) Jesus refers to the Law and the Prophets as summing up the entire Scripture. In the Old Testament, Book 2, Chronicles 34:30, the reference to the Book of the Covenant must be to the Torah, or the original law. The modern Christian terms "Old Testament" and "New Testament" are substitutes for the older terms "Old Covenant" and "New Covenant." The Samaritans, who claim to be the real Children of Israel and disavow the Jews as schismatics from their Law of Moses, only recognize the Pentateuch, of which they have their own version, which is slightly different from that in the Old Testament.

The primitive Torah must have been in old Hebrew, but there is no Hebrew manuscript of the Old Testament which can be dated with certainty earlier than 916 A.D. Hebrew ceased to be a spoken tongue with the Jews during or after the Captivity, and by the time we come to the period of

Jesus, most cultivated Hebrews used the Greek language, and others used Aramaic (including Syriac and Chaldee), Latin, or local dialects. There was also an Arabic version. For historical purposes the most important versions were the Greek (the Septuagint), and the Latin version (the Vulgate). The Septuagint was supposedly prepared by 70 or 72 Jews (the Latin *septuaginta* means seventy) working independently and at different times, the earliest portion dating from about 284 B.C. This version was used by the Jews of Alexandria and the Hellenized Jews who were spread over all parts of the Roman Empire. The Vulgate was a Latin translation made by the celebrated Father of the Christian Church, St. Jerome, from Hebrew, early in the fifth century A.D., superseding the older Latin versions. Neither the Septuagint nor the Vulgate have an absolutely fixed or certain text. The present standard text of the Vulgate, as accepted by the Roman Church, was issued by Pope Clement VIII (A.D. 1592-1605).

It is likely that the early Christians were divided into two parties. One was a Judaizing party which wished to remain in adherence to the Jewish views and customs while recognizing the mission of Jesus. The other party, led by Paul, broke with Jewish traditions and the orthodox interpretation of Jewish Law. Needless to say, Pauline Christianity prevailed. But the Jews in the Apostle's time (and since) were strongly influenced by the Talmud, a body of orally transmitted law and doctrine that was eventually transcribed by schools of doctors and learned men. The Talmudists took the divergent texts of the Old Testament and interpreted them by a mass of traditional commentary and lore. In the sixth century they evolved the Massorah, which may be regarded as the body of authoritative Jewish Hadith. Perhaps the best known part of the Talmud is the first part, called the Mishna—a collection of traditions and decisions prepared by the rabbi Judah about 150 A.D.

Centuries passed before the appearance of the four (officially accepted) Gospels, the book of the Acts of the Apostles, twenty-one letters written to churches and individuals by Paul, John, James, Peter, and Jude, and the Book of Revelation, possibly authored by St. John. Together they comprise

the New Testament.

The four Gospels which we have today were by no means the only gospel narratives in circulation. All this body of unmethodical literature was casual in nature. No wonder, because the early Christians expected an imminent end of the world. Of all the miracles described in the four Gospels, only one is described in all four. Other miracles were described in noncanonical gospels (Thomas, Peter, James, Pseudo-Matthew, Nicodemus, Bartholomew, Phillip) which are not mentioned in any of the four canonical Gospels. Some of the Epistles contain expositions of doctrine, but this has been understood differently by different churches, giving rise to over 250 Christian denominations in the USA today. In the first one hundred years after Christ there were probably hundreds of Epistles (letters), and not all the Epistles now viewed as canonical were always thought genuine as to authorship and authoritative as to doctrine. Modern computer analysis of the language of some of Paul's letters brings into doubt the traditional ascribing of Pauline authorship, but this should not be surprising. It was a commonly accepted, legitimate practice in those days for a disciple under tutelage to sign his master's name to a document or letter.

An Epistle of St. Barnabas and an Apocalypse of St. Peter were recognized by Presbyter Clement of Alexandria (around 180 A.D.). The Apocalypse of St. John, which is part of the canon in the West, forms no part of the Peshitta (Syriac) version of the Eastern Christians, which was produced about 411-433 A.D. and was used by the Nestorian Christians.

The Book of Revelation was not the only "final Apocalypse" written in the field. There were several such narratives, all with greatly varying theological themes and details. They were prophecies of "things which must shortly come to pass"; they

could not have been intended for long preservation, for "the time is at hand." The final form of the New Testament canon for the West was not fixed until the fourth century A.D. (367 A.D.) by Athanasius, 14 years before the reaffirmation of the text of the Nicene Creed in 381 at the Second Ecumenical Council in Constantinople.

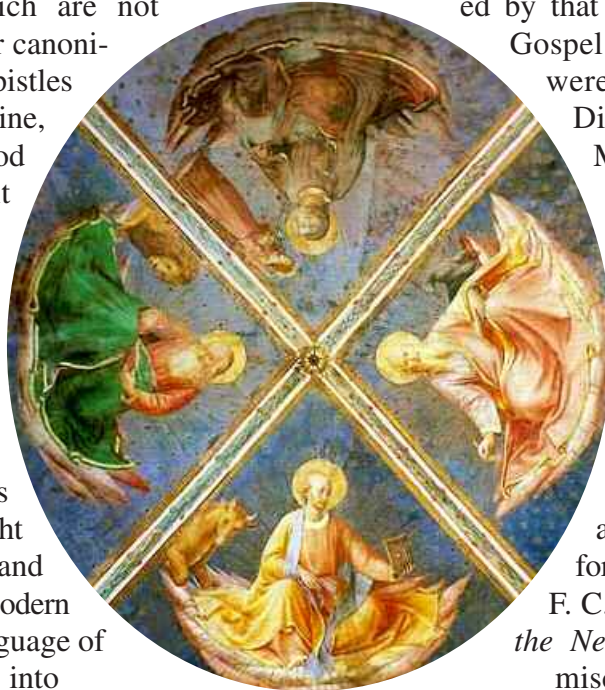
When were the Gospels written? By the end of the second century A.D. they were in existence, but it does not follow that they had been selected by that date to form a canon. Two

Gospel writers, Mark and Luke, were not among the twelve Disciples called by Jesus.

Mark's Gospel is generally taken to be the earliest, conservative estimates placing its date as early as 60 A.D. and as late as 100 A.D. But scholars agree that, like the other authors of the Gospels, Mark borrowed heavily from an unknown original source, abbreviated as Q (from the German word for source, *Quelle*). As Professor F. C. Burkitt remarked (*Canon of the New Testament*), it is an odd miscellany: "The four biographies of Jesus Christ...are not independent of each other, and

neither of them was intended by its writer to form one of a quartet. But they are all put side by side, unharmonized, one of them being actually imperfect at the end [Mark*] and one being only the first volume of a larger work." Clement of Rome (cir. 97 A.D.) and Polycarp (cir. 112 A.D.) quote sayings of Jesus in a form different from those found in the present canonical Gospels. Polycarp (Epistle, vii) inveighs much against men "who pervert the sayings of the Lord to their own lusts," and he wants to turn to "the Word handed down to us from the beginning," thus referring to a Tradition earlier than the four orthodox Gospels. (Continued) □

—Rick Manoff



Fresco, Fra Angelico, Chapel of Nicholas V, Vatican Palace

The Four Evangelists

*One surviving text recently discovered is the Gospel of Thomas, believed by many experts to be older than the Gospel of St. Mark.