

Origins of the Bible

Part 1: Overview

Let's start with a pop quiz; we all know that the bible is an anthology of various "books" – How many books make up the Bible?

Traditional Hebrew Scriptures	24			Total=24
Protestant Bible	39 OT	27 NT		Total=66
Lutheran* and Anglican Bibles	39 OT	27 NT	14 Apoc	Total=80
Roman Catholic Bible	46 OT	27 NT	7 DeuCan	Total=80
Greek Orthodox** Bible	54 OT	27 NT		Total=81
Ethiopian** Bible	54 OT	35 NT		Total=89

**These are not fixed canons*

+ There are differences within the Orthodox and Oriental churches

So, though Jews and Christians broadly share a scriptural tradition and heritage, what gets included varies a bit between different groups.

What has been generally acknowledged is that what we consider "scripture" has been determined *historically*; that is, the process of defining the canon was a human one. There is a history there, a human story behind their writing and selection. Neither the Jewish nor Christian tradition has claimed a supernatural origin of the scriptures. Unlike the Koran or Book of Mormon, it has never claimed for itself to be the utterances of a divine being directly transcribed.

At most, it has claimed to be divinely "inspired," but what form that takes is never defined. Whatever authority the Bible may claim comes not from its divine provenance but through its acceptance, across time, as literature that, in some manner, resonate with the experience of its readers in their individual relationships with God.

Perhaps the most helpful way to view scripture is a series of conversations across time about the nature of God and the relationship of humanity with God. It is a book that occasionally contradicts itself, that offers multiple perspectives, and that offers few simple answers to our deepest questions. It is a mix of genres: histories, polemics, sermons, advice letters, reflections, poetry, and more. It is also an invitation to enter into the story of God among humanity and to see that we too are part of that story. It is a starting point for our faith journeys but not a detailed map; a guide to our destination but not the destination itself.

It would be remiss to not say where the term "bible" itself comes from. If you are a fan of etymology or a student of Greek, you will recognize that bible is a cognate of the Greek word

biblia, which simply means “books.”

For those who love trivia, the Greek word has its origins in the name of the ancient Levantine city of Byblos, which was the center of the papyrus trade in ancient times. The Bible was original known in Greek as *ta Biblia to hagion*, which translates as the “the holy books.”

In the Christian era, the need for Christians to keep their writings in an easily transportable format meant that it was copied out in codices instead of scrolls. So Christian scriptures became probably the earliest “best-seller” codex. And as it was likely the only codex, or book, many people ever encountered it became known simply as “the Book,” or bible.

Origins of the Bible

Part 2: Bible Breakdown

In our Christian tradition, we generally understand the Bible to be divided into 3 parts or sections: The Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Apocrypha.

Most of us are familiar with the Old and New Testaments. The *idea* of such a division dates back as far as the second century AD, long before a definitive canon of scripture considering Jesus was even imagined. It has its roots in the words of the prophet Jeremiah;

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Jeremiah 31:31-33

Most early Christians believed (and still believe) that Jesus represented a new endeavor in God's ancient desire to free humanity from its bondage to fear. Therefore, stories about Jesus and his early followers were stories of this new covenant, a new testimony about God's continuing mission.

There was a lot of debate in the early church, which we'll get into at another time, about the role of the older stories (the Old Testament) in the continuing life of the church, but this division in the texts is rooted in this thinking about the division in God's relation to humanity before and after Jesus.

The third section known as the apocrypha, or to Roman Catholics as the Deuterocanon, are perhaps a little less known. By the time of Alexander the Great (356-323BC), Hebrew was no longer a living language, no one used it in everyday life. All learned people of the Mediterranean basin spoke Greek. It was the language of Alexander and his successor kings, it was the language of philosophy and learning, and it was the common language of commerce from the straits of Gibraltar to the Persian Gulf.

Ever since the destruction of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, more than two centuries before Alexander's birth, Israelites had been leaving their ancient homeland and establishing communities in cities across the Mediterranean world. The people of this diaspora also adopted Greek as their language which left them in a bit of a dilemma. The resilience of the social and religious commitments remained strong, but their ability to access their sacred stories in writing was being lost as the number of people able to read Hebrew diminished. To address this, an effort was undertaken to translate the already accepted Hebrew canon into Greek. No one is really sure who spearheaded this project or where it was done, but

scholars believe the most likely location was in Alexandria Egypt, at that time the largest, richest, and most diverse city, by far, in the world and probably sometime in the third century BC (so the 200's).

By tradition it was completed by seventy scholars and its original title was "The Translation of the Seventy, which became shortened to just "Seventy." And so today it is usually referred to as the Septuagint, from the Latin word for "seventy" (*septuaginta*). This was the version that was widely used in the time of Jesus. In fact, whenever Jesus or the authors of the epistles quotes from scripture, they quote from the Septuagint.

Later, after Jesus had died and Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans, remaining Jewish scholars engaged in an effort to recapture the scriptures in Hebrew. As they did so, it turned out that there were some differences between their new Hebrew version and the Septuagint. As a side note, older texts discovered as part of the Dead Sea scrolls, in many cases, reveal that the Septuagint was a largely faithful translation to the Hebrew texts extant at the time of translation but that the contents of some of the Hebrew texts had shifted over time.

It is the difference between these revered Hebrew texts, called the Masoretic text and the Septuagint that is the source of the books found in the Apocrypha (which means *hidden away*). Writings from the Septuagint that were not found in the Masoretic texts were deemed questionable as the New Testament was being established and so ended up in this curious, in between status of not quite secular but not exactly spiritual enough.

In many Protestant traditions, the apocrypha was eliminated because as the 16th century reformers began translating Bibles into vernacular languages they were purposefully left out as they tended to rely primarily on the Masoretic texts as their source.

Origins of the Bible

Part 3: Hebrew Scripture vs The Old Testament

As we saw in part 2, there are some differences between the Christian and Jewish canons, largely related to the differences between ancient Greek and Hebrew versions of Israel's sacred writings. But the bulk of the content is, nevertheless, the same. However, that content is organized differently in Christian and Jewish bibles.

Christians have tended to organize the material into four categories: law, history, wisdom, and prophets.

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

Jewish tradition has thought about the scriptures in a different way, dividing it into three, Torah, Nevi'im, and Ketuvim, translated as the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings.

Torah (Law)	Nevi'im (Prophets)	Ketuvim (Writings)	
Genesis	Joshua	Psalms	Daniel
Exodus	Judges	Proverbs	Ezra (includes Nehemiah)
Leviticus	Samuel	Job	Chronicles
Numbers	Kings	Song of Songs*	
Deuteronomy	Isaiah	Ruth*	
	Jeremiah	Lamentations*	
	Ezekiel	Ecclesiastes*	
	Minor Prophets	Esther*	

* These books are assigned to be read aloud in synagogue on special occasions

Song of Songs – Passover

Ruth – Shavuot (Pentecost)

Lamentations – Tisha B'av

Ecclesiastes – Sukkot (Festival of Booths)

Esther - Purim

In Judaism, the scriptures are usually referred to as the Tanakh, rather than the Bible. Tanakh is an acronym of the constituent parts of the Hebrew Bible. **T**ORAH, **N**EVIM, **K**ETUVIM: T-N-K (*remember, written Hebrew has no vowels*)

For this study, we will follow the Jewish schema as that was well established long before Jesus' time. We will look at each of these sections in detail later, but for let's take a quick look at each of these now.

Torah

Christian sometimes refer to these books as the Pentateuch and they are first five books of scripture in all traditions. By tradition these were written by Moses, but modern scholars believe that multiple authors and editors contributed to their creation and that they were likely brought into something like the final form in the period following the Babylonian exile. Other Jewish traditions suggest that Ezra was the principal editor of their final form. These books tell the story of Israel from God's creation until their arrival in the Jordan Valley.

Nevi'im (Prophets)

The Hebrew tradition did not differentiate between the histories (Judges-Kings – minus Ruth) and the prophets in the same way that the Christian tradition does. Instead, this tradition divides the prophets into three categories, the Former Prophets (Judges-Kings), the Latter Prophets (Isiah, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah) and the Twelve (the Minor prophets). Jewish tradition does not include Daniel or Lamentations among the prophetic books. Clearly, the prophetic books had different authors, though even individual books may have more authors than the primary prophet (Isaiah is a good example). These were written over a long period of time, but primarily during the existence of the Davidic monarchies of Israel and Judah though they continue into the exile period itself. The Nevi'im likely took its final form after the return of the aristocracy from exile and the reestablishment of Temple. These books tell the story of Israel from their establishment in the Promised land through to the overthrow of the Davidic monarchy by outside invaders and the removal of the aristocracy to exile in Babylon.

Ketuvim (Writings)

The Ketuvim is a bit of a catch-all section and Jewish tradition has, like the Prophets, grouped them into three categories: poetic works, the five Megillot, and the "other" books (primarily histories). Psalms, Proverbs, and Job (an epic poem in Hebrew) are the poetic works. Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther are known as the Hamesh Megillot or the Five Scrolls because each of them is read at an important Jewish holiday (Song of Songs – Passover, Ruth – Shavuot (Pentecost), Lamentations – Tisha B'av

Ecclesiastes – Sukkot (Festival of Booths), and Esther – Purim). And finally, the other, includes Daniel, Ezra/Nehemiah, and Chronicles. Ezra and Daniel are the only books of the Tanakh not written in Hebrew; they were written in Aramaic (Jesus' language). These books were the last to be canonized, their final form only taking shape as late the 2nd century CE (AD). The Ketuvim contains some stories of the Hebrew experience after exile, as well as stories that seem to come from the experience of Jews who chose to remain in Babylon rather than return (Esther, and Daniel) as well as timeless meditations on the nature of God and God's relationship with us.

Origins of the Bible

Part 4: Let's Talk History

We'll be referring a lot in this study to various historical eras; so it might be helpful to have an overview of the broad history of the eastern Mediterranean region (often referred to as the Levant) where Israel and its neighbors existed.

Israel Specific History

Drawing primarily from the Bible's narrative of Israelite history, we can separate that history into several distinct eras. We will explore a historical timeline drawn from evidence outside of the Bible later, but these divisions most closely track with how the various authors of the Biblical books themselves understood that history.

Age of the Patriarchs

A near mythic age when Israel consisted only of a single extended family

Israel in Egypt

Israel expands from a single family into a much larger body of extended clans and tribes

Exodus

A brief period of nomadic wandering in the wilderness as the various tribes and clans seek a permanent home

Conquest of Canaan and Era of the Judges

An extended period (over 400 years) as the Israelite tribes settle and establish control over the Jordan river valley and surrounding hill country

Era of the Kings and the First Temple

Israel moves from an ethnic group to a political reality with effective control over a defined area

Exile in Babylon

Israel falls under the control of larger neighboring states, their autocratic leadership is taken captive and removed to the capital city of their conqueror (Babylon)

Return and the Second Temple

Some of the descendants of those taken in exile return to the Jordan valley and reestablish a client kingdom as part of larger imperial powers.

It is difficult to establish approximate dates for some of these eras, but drawing on the consensus of scholars, a timeline might look like this:

~1800-1500 BC	Age of the Patriarchs
~1500-1200 BC	Israel in Egypt
~1200 BC	Exodus
~1000BC	Establishment of the kingdom of Israel
~900 BC	Israel splits into two kingdoms (Israel in the north and Judah in the south)
720BC	Destruction of Israel by the Assyrian empire and resettlement
586BC	Destruction of Judah and Exile
~520BC	Some Israelites begin to return to Judah. Jerusalem and Temple rebuilding begins
332BC	Israel conquered by Alexander the Great
160BC	Maccabean Revolt – Jewish autonomy restored
63BC	Romans conquer Israel, Herod installed as puppet ruler and Temple expanded
26-30CE	Earthly ministry of Jesus
70CE	Jerusalem destroyed by the Romans after a Jewish revolt

Ok, so that is the more-or-less traditional Bible timeline of Israel. It is important to understand though that there is little (as in almost none) corroborating evidence of most of this prior to about 800BC. There is no archaeological or historical evidence of the patriarchs, the time in Egypt, the Exodus or for a King David or Solomon. Which is not to say that these people didn't exist or that there isn't something real and tangible about some of these stories.

So it's important to remind ourselves that the Israelite authors of the Hebrew scriptures were less interested in compiling an accurate historical narrative than they were in providing a theological interpretation to their national legends. In other words, they didn't just "make up" these stories; they believed them to be accurate portrayals of what had happened. We need to remember that these stories emerged in a culture without widespread literacy and

without the tools of historical inquiry that we can take for granted.

And this isn't something nefarious or even unique to the ancient Israelites. All peoples and nations, across time (including our own) have done and continue to do this. Humans are meaning makers; that is, we don't feel as though events just happen, but that we can identify meaning and purpose in their unfolding. We see our stories as having *telos* or direction – they are moving towards... something.

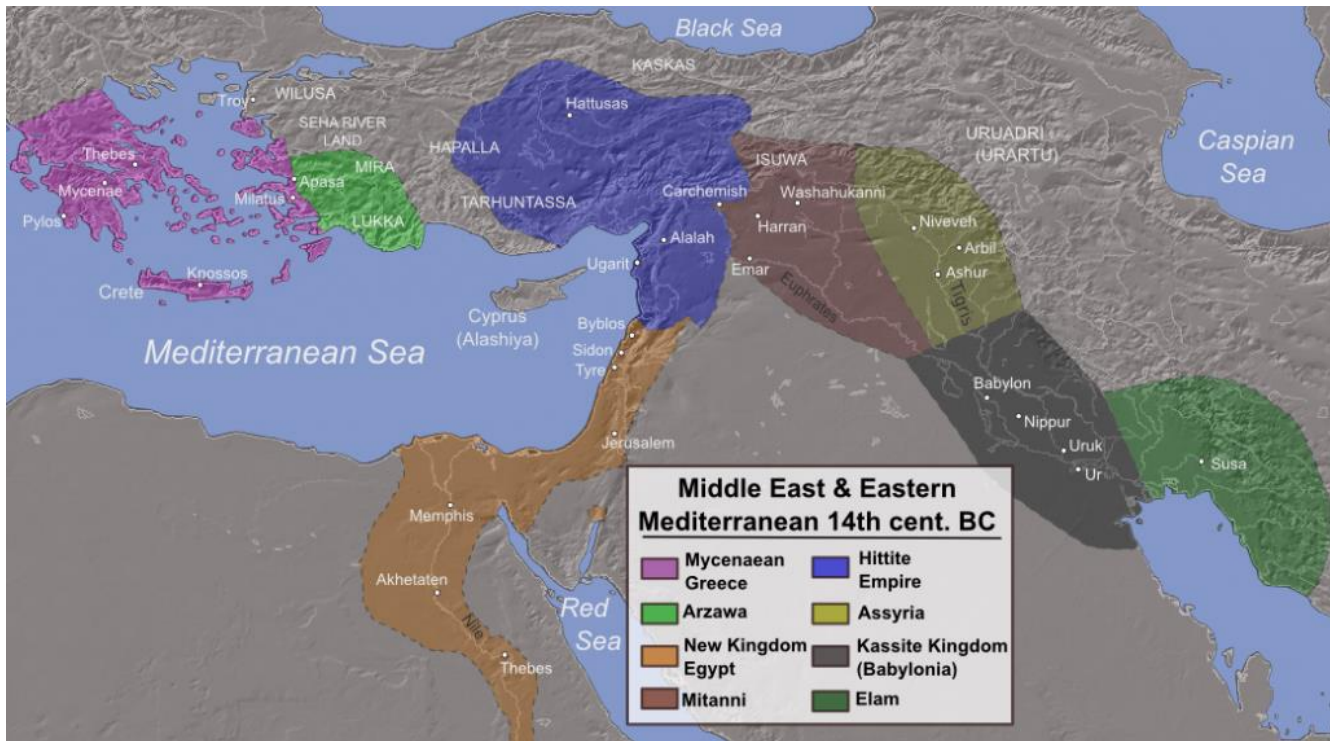
We can see this same thing from our own experiences. We can see it in the competing narratives over the first Thanksgiving, the place of slavery and native genocide in our history books and we have probably all noticed how different political actors have offered different interpretations of our own American history; allowing them to proffer both different understandings of what was notable and worthy in the past but also “where” that history is “taking” us.

Origins of the Bible

Part 5: Let's Talk (More) History

Ok, if we can accept that the Bible's purpose isn't to relate an accurate history; then what can we understand of Israel's history from other sources?

The world of 3500 years ago (in the Eastern Mediterranean)



By 1500BC, the eastern Mediterranean was largely controlled by a handful of powerful empires with complex trade relations and cultural exchanges. It was a cosmopolitan and interconnected world with growing cities and rising literacy.

For most of this period, the Jordan valley and highlands were controlled by the Egyptian empire. In 1500BC, Egypt was already an ancient culture an empire. The pyramids of Giza were even then a thousand years old. It was also in Egypt that the first known monotheistic religion emerged during the reign of Akhenaten (~1335BCE).

Akhenaten sought to abolish the worship of all gods except Aten (the sun god). His reforms were undone by his son, Tutankhamun.



Starting around 1200BC though, this world began to implode during a period known as the Late Bronze Age collapse. In a period of less than 100years, several of these large empires disappeared, those that remained contracted considerably, trade diminished almost entirely, literacy declined and a number of cities, especially in the Levant were destroyed. The collapse led to a kind of dark age that lasted several hundred years.

The reasons for this collapse aren't well understood and there is little consensus among historians, but it seems as though there were several factors. These included a changing climate that impacted the agricultural basis of wealth and trade, shifting military fortunes as iron began to be used, displaced persons who joined together to threaten and overrun imperial territories, and probably a lack of imagination among rulers who were accustomed to a more stable world.

It is in this collapse and following dark age that Israel emerged. We get the first clear archaeological evidence of a people with unique practices that we can point to as "Israelite," and we get the first mentions of a peoples known as Hebrews in the historical record.

Origins of the Bible

Part 6: Let's Talk (Even More) History

As I already mentioned there is little evidence to back up the Biblical story of Israel's origins rooted in conquest. Jericho, perhaps the most famous of conquest stories, didn't even exist as a city in the era when Israel was emerging. And as to the exodus, there aren't any Egyptian records that corroborate it, at least not as presented by the Bible.

But there is still a really interesting story that can be pieced together from what evidence we do have!

So let's look a possible early history.

In the period leading up to the collapse, it is very likely that the societies faced increasing pressures and tensions. This was especially true in the Levant. Though Egypt had long controlled the area, there was conflict with the Hittite empire to the north and there are records of intermittent warfare in the region. The records also mention a class of people called the Apiru (or Habiru). These weren't an ethnic group, but rather a general term to describe outlaws and others living on the margins of civilization. The earliest such mention refers to a group of Aramean nomads from southern Mesopotamia (one whose principal cities was Ur).

The Apiru were drawn from many different ethnic groups, many being slaves escaped from the Egyptian controlled cities. They established small settlements in the Judean hill country where they could eke out a living from agriculture, herding, and the occasional raid.

As the cities were either conquered or abandoned in the 13th century BC, many people likely joined the Apiru in their hill-country settlements. Archaeology suggests that the earliest Israelites were, at least culturally, no different from the lowland Canaanites. The one noticeable difference between the highland and lowland peoples though was the eating of pork. Archaeologists consistently find that the highland settlements are devoid of pig bones.

The other thing that separates the highland and lowland groups is the worship of the god El (or sometimes YHWH). Presumably the people of these disparate hill settlements, drawn from escaped slaves, outlaws, or just people seeking freedom from an oppressive system, began to work cooperatively against the remaining Canaanite cities, united by their shared religious perspective. We see a wonderful example of this in the Song of Deborah from Judges chapter 4, where Deborah and Barack cobble together a force to raid a Canaanite city and who are saved from disaster when a severe rainstorm mores the Canaanite chariots in mud and the Israelite raiders are able to defeat an otherwise superior force.

Though nothing like 600,000 people probably fled from Egypt to the Levant as in Exodus, there were a group of people called the Hyksos who are thought to have originated in the Levant who were able to conquer northern Israel and establish a kingdom there in the 17th and 16th centuries BC. Eventually, the southern kingdom was able to defeat the Hyksos, though some of them may have fled to the Levant. Even in Roman times there were writers who connected the Hyksos to the Israelites and their history may be the inspiration behind the stories of Joseph and the Exodus.

Though there is no evidence of Moses outside of scripture, it should be noted that the name itself is Egyptian; it means “child” and it seems unlikely that a people would choose a national origin myth rooted in slavery, marginalization, and subjugation if it had not been a genuine experience. So perhaps a number of the earliest “Hebrews” were slaves escaped from Egyptian rulers, though perhaps in the Levant rather than in Egypt itself who were supplemented by the remnants of a people who once loomed large but who had been brought low.

But the Israelites were not the only people to emerge in this era, another group which may have originated in Crete settled along the southeastern shore of the Levant. We know them as the Philistines. These were among the several groups of displaced persons from the era of the collapse.

In the power vacuum left by the retreating empires, many small city-states and loose confederations emerged. For our purposes, the two most important are the Israelites and the Philistines. While much of the earliest stories about the Israelites reflect the challenges of differentiating themselves from their Canaanite cousins, much of the latter stories are about their conflicts with the technically superior and expansive Philistine confederacy.

The story of Israel’s emergence then, is one of cultural and military conflict in a dangerous and unsettled time. It’s about how a marginalized people find freedom and (relative) safety only through communal cooperation. It is a story of the power of faith and hope.

Historically, Israel thrived during the “dark age” period after the Late Bronze Age Collapse. Beginning in the 9th century BCE, the remaining powers of Egypt and Assyria had been able to re-establish themselves and new powers arose such as Babylon and others such as the Hittites had reestablished themselves. As these powers grew and competed, the small kingdoms of Israel and Judah were overmatched and eventually became vassal states of larger empires. The final destruction of Jerusalem, in fact, was the result of its vassal king joining a revolt against the Babylonian emperor and its return to Jerusalem due to the magnanimity of the Persian emperor who conquered Babylon. And the Maccabees revolted against the Seleucid emperors who had grabbed a portion of Alexander’s empire after his death.

So, why bother with all this history?

Though we know that the history presented in the Bible may be lacking in the rigor we expect of history today, the ancient Israelites seemed to have accepted its version of events and used it to explain how God worked in the world. Their theology, their sense of God's will was derived from that understanding. But what if their understanding was incorrect? What if that meant their understanding of who God is, what God wants, and how people should live was incorrect?

That very idea seems to be behind much of Jesus' teaching and ministry and it was His willingness to challenge their interpretation that led to his death. So this history is important because getting it right strongly shapes how we respond to God and God's will for us.

A Potential Timeline

1650-1550 BCE	Hyksos Reign in Egypt
~1350 BCE	Akhenaten Pharaoh of Egypt
~1300 BC	Earliest known settlement of "Israelites"
1200-1150 BCE	Late Bronze Age Collapse
~1200 BCE	Philistines settle Mediterranean coast
~1200 BCE	Oldest known mention of "Israel" (Egyptian)
~1000 BCE	Likely formation of Israelite kingdom
900 BCE	Emergence of the Neo Assyrian Empire
850 BCE	Earliest mention the kingdom of Israel or Judah
~800 BCE	Oldest known mention of David (Tel Dan Stele)

Origins of the Bible

Part 7: Torah

So let's dive into the Hebrew scriptures starting with the Torah. When Jesus refers to the "Law and the Prophets" in our New Testament, the "Law" refers to the first five books of the scriptures, collectively known as Torah. Sometimes, they are also called the "Pentateuch," which comes from the Greek words for "five scrolls."

These are the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

And though we usually translate Torah as "Law" its actual meaning is something more like "authoritative received tradition." Because, as most of us know, the majority of the material in this section does not consist of law codes, but rather narratives about the interaction of God and humanity that tells us something about God's will and nature.

Much of the material has a mythological quality to it, with fantastic elements (giants, people who live for centuries, talking animals, etc.) that bear resemblance to the mythological stories of other nearby cultures. For the most part, it does not describe God as a single God, but rather as the most important and powerful among a number of other gods and divine beings.

Though Moses was traditionally thought of as the author, it seems very likely that much of the material is drawn from pre-existing oral narratives that were captured in writing many centuries after the events alleged took place. The Torah scriptures themselves have no explicit claims of authorship. The idea that Moses wrote these books seems to have come from the structure of Deuteronomy, which is built as a series of lectures by Moses. In Joshua and Kings, there are mentions of a Torah of Moses, which are references to Deuteronomy. Ezra/Nehemiah and Chronicles expand the "Torah of Moses" to include Leviticus as well. But it isn't until the second century BCE (i.e., the 100's) that an extra-biblical commentator (the Rabbi Ben Sira) connects the whole of Torah to Moses).

The material, in fact, shows signs of many hands in its compilation. Important question for those seeking a deeper understanding of these books is to ask, who was this written for and by whom? How were these books used in ancient Israel?

For the most part, there is little historical or archeological evidence for the people and events described, though undoubtedly many of these stories have their genesis in actual, remembered events even if embellished or altered in multiple retellings.

The narrative of Torah begins with the creation of the world and tells of the origin of humans and seeks to explain something of the world we find ourselves in. It then goes on to tell about the earliest ancestors of the nation of Israel (thus reinforcing a shared identity) and of how

they became a people enslaved and oppressed by the Egyptians. It closes with the story of Israel's departure, as a people, from bondage and of their efforts to build their own society and to rule themselves.

Origins of the Bible

Part 8 – So, Who Did Write the Torah?

The Torah is probably the oldest part of the Hebrew scriptures, though Job may be older, and there are pieces of other books that may also pre-date the Torah (such as the Song of Deborah).

The earliest versions of the Torah may have been written down as early as the ninth or tenth centuries BCE, though it continued to be expanded and edited for centuries and only came to its final form near the end of the Babylonian Exile.

These books would have been created and used primarily by the priests and royal court. That the king should read from the Torah daily is among the numerous commandments, and its earliest forms would have guided how justice was dispensed. There is little evidence, even within the scriptures themselves, for the *reading* of Torah in worship, though it contains plenty of detailed instructions for how to carry out the required Temple sacrifices.

The one book where we do have some clearer idea of its origins is the book of Deuteronomy, which means “second Law,” though in Hebrew it is known as *Devarim*, which means “Words.” There is a consensus that Deuteronomy is the book mentioned in Kings that was the basis of a series of reforms undertaken by King Josiah of Judah in the late seventh century BCE.

The high priest Hilkiyah said to Shaphan the secretary, “I have found the book of the law in the house of the LORD.” When Hilkiyah gave the book to Shaphan, he read it. Then Shaphan the secretary came to the king, and reported to the king, “Your servants have emptied out the money that was found in the house, and have delivered it into the hand of the workers who have oversight of the house of the LORD.” Shaphan the secretary informed the king, “The priest Hilkiyah has given me a book.” Shaphan then read it aloud to the king. When the king heard the words of the book of the law, he tore his clothes. Then the king commanded the priest Hilkiyah, Ahikam son of Shaphan, Achbor son of Micaiah, Shaphan the secretary, and the king’s servant Asaiah, saying, “Go, inquire of the LORD for me, for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that has been found; for great is the wrath of the LORD that is kindled against us, because our ancestors did not obey the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us.”

2Kings 22:8-13

It is believed that rather than being “found,” the book was created by the priests and Josiah to justify the reforms they wished to make. The intent of these reforms was to institute a stricter monotheism and to centralize religious control in Jerusalem. It included the collection and destruction of idols and temples, the obliteration of sacred groves, the destruction of altars of sacrifices outside of Jerusalem, and the execution of priests who served them as well

as the priests who served other gods. (You can read all about it in 2Kings)

Like all things Bible related, there is argument and controversy around the origins of the Torah, but the general consensus speaks of four streams of authorship that came together to forge the Torah.

These four are usually named the Jahwist, the Elohist, the Priestly, and the Deuteronomist (often shortened to J, E, P, & D). The Jahwist and Elohist are so named because each uses different names for God which can't be explained as just stylistic differences. The Jahwist uses the tetragrammaton (YHWH) for God while the Elohist uses Elohim. The J stories are the most colorful and the J God is the most anthropomorphic, such as in the story of Adam and Eve where God walks around or in Abraham's argument with God about the fate of Sodom. The E God, on the other hand is a bit more regal, the E stories contain divine revelation in dreams, speak of the importance of "fearing" God.

There is speculation that these two sources represent the traditions of the northern and southern tribes and were first woven together after the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians (~720BCE).

The Priestly source is primarily concerned with genealogies, with dates, and with ritual. Leviticus is almost all P material. Genesis actually opens with the P version of creation (the seven day one).

And the Deuteronomist, of course, is mostly in the material of Deuteronomy, but its editorial gloss also seeks to amplify the importance of covenant and the Jerusalem Temple. Since much of the earlier material speaks of the altars being set up by the Patriarchs, much of the early history of Israel directly contradicts D's goal of centralizing worship in Jerusalem, so we can see that the D strand is much later than the others.

Rabbinic tradition also holds that it was Ezra, who is described in the scriptures as priest and a scribe, who compiled the Torah in preparation for the return to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the Temple.

If we think about Israel's likely history as a group of marginalized people from a diversity of backgrounds, who slowly developed a unitary religious and cultural identity, perhaps we can appreciate the need to meld their various stories into a unifying narrative that reflected their understanding of God, their relationship to the God, and their relationships to one another. We can also see how the experience of exile might push those committed to the worship of God to develop their stories and traditions into a fixed form to serve as the basis of an identity that could bring solidarity and purpose to the enterprise of rebuilding a nation.

Origins of the Bible

Part 9: Near Eastern Mythology and Views of the Divine

Though I don't intend to go into the details of each of the books, I thought it might be helpful to understand the cultural inheritance of ancient Israel that shaped their thoughts about God.

Though we mentioned the brief reign of Akhenaten of Egypt, who tried to establish a monotheistic religion in Egypt, the religious views of the earliest Israelites were probably more influenced by Mesopotamian ideas of divinity because the language of these stories is a Semitic language known as Akkadian, which is very similar to ancient Hebrew. And since the Israelites seem to have mostly emerged as a subset of the Canaanite population, the mythic stories of these people also figure into the religious world view of the early Israelites.

In general, these nearby cultures had gods and goddesses who had powers over human life and who became involved in human life, for good and ill. However, the gods were not guardians of morality, nor did they dictate the shape of human societies. Rather they lived in realms apart from humans for the most part, but within divine societies that mirrored the divisions and conflicts of human ones. Mostly they react to events rather than creating them.

From the pantheon of the Canaanites we get much of the cosmology that dominates the Torah. One of the names of God in the Hebrew scriptures is Elohim, or just El (sometimes El Shaddai). El was the chief god in the pantheon of the Canaanite city-states, and was the God of storms. In their mythology, he was both the father and the king of all the other gods. He was said to live in a tent high atop a mountain and he ruled with the aid of a council of gods (the sons of El), similar to what we read at the beginning of Job. El had a wife also, a goddess named Asherah. In these stories, there is a conflict among the gods and El largely hands over his authority to a god named Baal, whose wife is named Anat whose sister was Astarte. You may recognize many of these from our own scriptures.

From Mesopotamian cosmology we get stories that seem to have strongly influenced the J (or Jahwist) contributions. The Babylonian myth of Atrahasis seems to have influenced the story of Adam and Eve. In that myth, humans were created to tend the gardens of the gods, and these gardens are the source of life-giving waters. Humans were created from clay and humans have personal relationships with divine beings. There is also a human revolt against the gods which leads to punishment, which includes difficult childbirth. The myth also goes on to talk about how humans became too numerous and noisy, which bothered the gods, so they prevailed upon the chief god, Enlil to reduce humanity. First, he sends a plague, but later a flood. One human, Atrahasis though has a close friendship with one of Enlil's rivals, Enki, who warns him to build a boat for his family and livestock.

Another important, and widely known story was the Epic of Gilgamesh, which also describes

a pantheon of gods riven by internal conflict and a conflict with humanity. Again, humanity is saved when a single human (Utnapishtim) with a divine friendship is warned of an impending flood and is able to save himself, his family, and his livestock by building a boat.

We can see in the similarities of these stories and the stories of the Hebrew scriptures is how Israel's discerning of God's nature led them to alter the popular stories of their day to describe the God they were becoming to know.

Origins of the Bible

Part 10 – Nevi'im

The second division of the Hebrew Scriptures is the Nevi'im, or the prophets. This section is divided between the Former Prophets and the Latter Prophets. The Former Prophets are the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings while the Latter Prophets are the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve. In Christianity, as we noted before, these books are divided into the Histories, the Major Prophets, and the Minor Prophets although there is not complete overlap as Judaism does not consider the books of Lamentations or Daniel as prophetic works.

Nevi'im (Prophets)	History	Prophets	
Joshua	Joshua	<i>Major</i>	<i>Minor</i>
Judges	Judges	Isaiah	Hosea
Samuel	Ruth	Jeremiah	Joel
Kings	1Samuel	Lamentations	Amos
Isaiah	2Samuel	Ezekiel	Obadiah
Jeremiah	1Kings	Daniel	Jonah
Ezekiel	2Kings		Micah
Minor Prophets	1Chronicles		Nahum
	2Chronicles		Habakkuk
	Ezra		Zephaniah
	Nehemiah		Haggai
	Esther		Zechariah
			Malachi

For our purposes let's separate the narrative histories from the prophetic works themselves.

First the prophets. In ancient Israel, during the time of the Davidic monarchy, there was usually a court official who was "the" prophet. And as we read the prophets, we will see that a great deal of what they say is related to the conduct of the kings (often as a critique). And for the most part, these prophets didn't so much predict the future as apply what they understood about God's character and will to the problems faced by the king. This person was understood to, in some way, be in close enough relationship to God as to be able to discern God's will. But not all the prophets were court prophets, others were voices which arose outside the king's circle and were often quite critical of the monarchy (Amos is a great example).

It is important to note that the prophets do not practice divination, such as we see in the book of Samuel. We might remember that David often had a priest through whom he could ask God what God wanted him to do. With the emergence of Nathan though, we see that David no longer goes to the priests to discern what God wants but can rely on Nathan the prophet to tell him directly.

There were prophets in the court of the both the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel and Judah. But the books as we know them came to be collected only after the destruction of the northern kingdom by the Assyrians in the late 8th century BCE. It should not be surprising then, that the prophetic works of most interest to the Judahite compilers were those that were most critical of the northern kings.

The prophetic books were compiled and edited over several centuries and only took their final form a couple of hundred years before Jesus was born. The bulk of that work probably occurred in the aftermath of the Babylonian conquest and exile in the sixth century BCE. Like the historical section of the former prophets, the prophetic works were strongly influenced by the perspective we call the Deuteronomic history. That point of view understood Israel's history as a tragic betrayal of God's trust that resulted in the destruction of the nation coupled with a promised restoration *IF* Israel would pursue a rigorous righteousness.

A timeline of the lives of the prophets

Northern Prophets

Joel	790-760 BC	2 Kings 11-15	Uzziah
Amos	780-760 BC	2 Kings 14-15	Jeroboam II (Uzziah)
Hosea	785-725 BC	2 Kings 15-18	Jeroboam II to Hoshea (Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz)
Isaiah	750-695 BC	2 Kings 15-20	Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah
Micah	745-725 BC	2 Kings 15	Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah

Southern Prophets

Nahum	660-630 BC	2 Kings 15-18	Manasseh, Amon, Josiah
Zephaniah	630-620 BC	Isaiah 10	Josiah
Habakkuk	620-610 BC	2 Kings 23	Josiah, Jehoahaz
Jeremiah	628-588 BC	2 Kings 22-25	Josiah to Zedekiah. The Captivity

Prophets of Exile

Obadiah	587 BC	2 Kings 25	After Jerusalem's Destruction (Reign of Nebuchadnezzar)
Ezekiel	596-574 BC	2 Kings 24	to the Jews Before and During the Captivity (Reign of Nebuchadnezzar)

Prophets of the Return to Jerusalem

Haggai	520-518 BC	Ezra 5-6	Rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem (Reign of Darius I)
Zechariah	520-510 BC	Ezra 5-6	Rebuilding and Dedication of the Temple (Reign of Darius I)

Malachi 420-397 BC Nehemiah 13 Second Reformation by Nehemiah
(Reign of Artaxerxes I)

Prophet	~ Year Active	Location
Joel	790-760 BCE	Northern Kingdom
Amos	780-760 BCE	Northern Kingdom
Hosea	785-725 BCE	Northern Kingdom
Isaiah	750-695 BCE	Northern Kingdom
Micah	745-725 BCE	Northern Kingdom
Northern Kingdom Destroyed by Assyria 720BCE		
Nahum	660-630 BCE	Southern Kingdom
Zephaniah	630-620 BCE	Southern Kingdom
Habakkuk	620-610 BCE	Southern Kingdom
Jeremiah	628-588 BCE	Southern Kingdom
Southern Kingdom Conquered by Babylon 586 BCE		
Obadiah	587 BCE	Babylonian Exile
Ezekiel	596-574 BCE	Babylonian Exile
Exiles Allowed to Return by Persia 534 BCE		
Haggai	520-518 BCE	Persian Empire
Zechariah	520-510 BCE	Persian Empire
Malachi	420-397 BCE	Persian Empire

The Former Prophets

The Former prophets are not actually prophetic books at all, but narratives of Israel's ancient history (at least as understood at the time of the kings). From the stories of Joshua and the first emergence of Israelites in the Jordan valley through the establishment of a single kingdom under David and Solomon, before its division into northern and southern kingdoms.

These books draw on some very old sources and were likely passed along orally for generations before being written down. In some cases, they weave together multiple (not always agreeing) versions of stories. When they might have first been written down isn't clear, but they were definitely well established prior to the reign of Josiah and his reform program encapsulated in Deuteronomy since it freely speaks of altars of sacrifice outside of Jerusalem without issue.

Like the works of the latter prophets, these stories were compiled and edited primarily for the education and edification of the royal court and Temple priesthood. They also reflect the perspective of the Deuteronomic historians, but they were well established enough that it is only lightly done.

Ultimately, the creation of this canon of literature highlighting the history of a people in a special relationship with God and seeking to answer the question “what does God want of *us*?” was instrumental in forming the identity of Judaism. This identity was principally shaped in the experience of destruction and exile. It caused the leaders of Israel to ascertain what it meant to be God’s people without a homeland or a material focus, a “place” for their worship. It was, in fact, the absence of a such a “place” to direct their religious energy that resulted in the formation of a generally accepted body of written material as a substitute.

And even as some of those leaders returned to the “place” of their identity and even rebuilt the Temple, the established canon’s importance never faded. Instead it was the canon that influenced how their communal religious life was structured and built, and no longer the other way around.

That’s why we see in the stories of Jesus that the questions he is asked (and the answers given) are all couched in terms long written down. All the conflicts between Jesus and the Pharisees and Sadducees are over interpretations of scripture. By the time of Jesus, Judean identity had come, first and foremost, about how one related to the scripture. Jesus is not here to “overthrow a single jot or tittle of the Law,” he claims; but rather to fulfill its promise and to answer its ultimate question “what does God want of *us*?”

Origins of the Bible

Part 11 the Ketuvim (Writings)

The third section of the Hebrew Scriptures are a collection of various unrelated works known in Hebrew as “the writings.” These include works primarily written in verse (including one that’s even a little erotic), Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Songs, Lamentations and Job. Some history; Daniel, Ezra/Nehemiah, and Chronicles. Some philosophy; Ecclesiastes. And a couple of short stories about brave women; Esther and Ruth.

A number of these were clearly written after the experience of the exile, as they either refer to it or speak of the experience of Jews living in the Persian empire. It also includes the only two books of the Hebrew scriptures not written in Hebrew – Daniel and Ezra/Nehemiah were originally composed in Aramaic (Jesus’ native language), a Semitic language related to Hebrew (similar to the relationship between Italian and Latin).

Ketuvim (Writings)	
Psalms	Daniel
Proverbs	Ezra (includes Nehemiah)
Job	Chronicles
Song of Songs*	
Ruth*	
Lamentations*	
Ecclesiastes*	
Esther*	

These were the latest books written to be considered authoritative and scripturally canonical. Like the other parts of the Hebrew scriptures, there is no known clear historical event that decided these books were part of a scriptural canon. And like everything to do with the Bible, there is plenty of scholarly debate, but it seems clear that these were considered “scripture” definitely by the middle of the second century CE (AD); which is to say that sometime in the hundred years after the crucifixion of Jesus.

Of course, the books themselves are likely older. Jesus quotes from several of them; especially the Psalms, but also Job, Chronicles, and Daniel. Other than the psalms (many of which are likely very old), most of these were composed or edited into their current form after the exile period. Scholars draw these conclusions based on several things, such as references to cities and trade items not known in earlier periods, language use, references to other scriptures, their presence in ancient manuscripts (or if they’re quoted elsewhere), and how God is described (strictly monotheistic for the most part here).

Several of these books have prominent roles in Jewish worship. The psalms are interwoven throughout that worship and are usually sung (or chanted). And as mentioned back in part 3,

five of these are read in their entirety at worship on particular holidays. They are known in Hebrew as the Hamesh Megillot

Song of Songs – Passover

Ruth – Shavuot (Pentecost)

Lamentations – Tisha B'av

Ecclesiastes – Sukkot (Festival of Booths)

Esther – Purim

Origins of the Bible

Part 12 – Focus on the Ketuvim

Since the Ketuvim is a bit of a mishmash of material, I wanted to touch on a couple of them in a little more detail.

Psalms

The book of Psalms has a rich history in worship and prayer for Jews and Christians, and some of them may represent some of the oldest poetry in praise of God. In medieval Europe, when books were still rare, Psalters (books with just the psalms) were relatively common, at least among those who were able to own books, and formed the basis of the prayer life of many.

There is a long tradition that David wrote almost all the psalms (several actually include author attributions that aren't David). His name appears in the superscription of 73 and small number of these refer to an event in his life. However, most scholars believe that the psalms were written by a large number of psalms across hundreds of years. It can probably be best thought of as a kind of hymnal composed in its modern form after the return from exile as a kind of "best of" collection for use in the reconstructed Temple.

The psalms are divided into five books, which by tradition parallel the five books of Moses. (similarly, Matthew has five "sections" each marked by a speech by Jesus). Each section ends with psalm containing a doxology, or statement of faith and belief in God. This arrangement is probably late in terms of its development, at least based on a psalm scroll found in Qumran which has them in a different order and includes some that are no longer part of the book of Psalms.

- 1-41 [Psa 41:13](#) Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen.
- 42-72 [Psa 72:19](#) Blessed be his glorious name forever; may his glory fill the whole earth. Amen and Amen.
- 73-89 [Psa 89:52](#) Blessed be the LORD forever. Amen and Amen.
- 90-106 [Psa 106:48](#) Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. And let all the people say, "Amen." Praise the LORD!
- 107-150 [Psa 150:6](#) Let everything that breathes praise the LORD! Praise the LORD! (*actually, the whole of Psalm 150 is a doxology*)

The Psalms vary quite a bit in their content; but are often divided into several broad categories such as;

- Hymns of Praise
- Royal Psalms (talk about God as king)

- Laments (this is nearly a third of the psalms) which are either individual laments or communal ones
- Thanksgivings
- Wisdom Psalms
- Miscellaneous – a number defy easy categorization ☺ and this group contains some favorites like 23 and 121

Post Exile History

Chronicles

Chronicles offers an alternate account of the ancient monarchy, very similar to the story in Samuel and Kings, but with some additional material possibly drawing on different sources. It especially seems to advance the perspective of the Levites, an order of Temple servants who had, over time, been continually subject to diminution by the Aaronic priesthood. By tradition Chronicles was written by Ezra and is a kind of part 1 of a larger work telling the story of Israel with part 2 being Ezra /Nehemiah. (The last 2 verses of Chronicles are the same as the first two in Ezra).

Ezra/Nehemiah

Though two books in most Christian Bibles, this is a single work in the Hebrew scriptures and seems to be the work of a single author. In rabbinic tradition, Ezra was instrumental in restoring worship in the Jerusalem when the Judean aristocracy returned in the 530's BCE)

Wisdom

Proverbs

Proverbs is part of a genre that was widespread in the ancient world, collections of aphorisms and pithy sayings, which seem to suggest a practical perspective on the ways of the world. Though the book opens saying it is a collection of Solomon's wisdom; it is unlikely that Solomon is the author of the book as we know it. Solomon is the patron "saint" of wisdom in Israelite tradition in the same way his father is the patron "saint" of music. Though some may certainly have originated with Solomon, much of the material can be found in similar collections from other nearby cultures. Proverbs promotes a kind of dispassionate rationalism which it suggests will lead to blessings. The book is structured as the advice of a father to his son.

Job

If Proverbs represents a collection of the "normal" wisdom about the working of the world, Job represents a crisis in that world view amid the realization that world is often unjust and unfair. Upright and moral living does not necessarily lead to success, evil falls on the good and bad alike, and Job forcefully makes this point as he seeks to bring God to account for the evil in the world. In truth, God never really answer's Job's charges and more or less says that the workings of God are beyond the ability of humans to understand. Most scholars believe that the story was written at the time of the Exile, representing a perspective on that experience.

Ecclesiastes

Like Job, Ecclesiastes is an attack on the reliability of tradition as guidance. Though ostensibly written by Solomon (at least according to the first verse) the author also seems to suggest he is powerless to affect corruption at the top of society and at the end identifies himself as an aged teacher. At any rate, whoever wrote the book was something of a world-weary critic of the elite of his day (and ours too, truly). It is, in many ways, a rejection of study as means to understand the world and thus, at least obliquely, a criticism of the very idea of a scriptural canon. It's inclusion in the Hebrew scriptures was debated amongst different factions well in the fourth century CE (AD).

Song of Songs

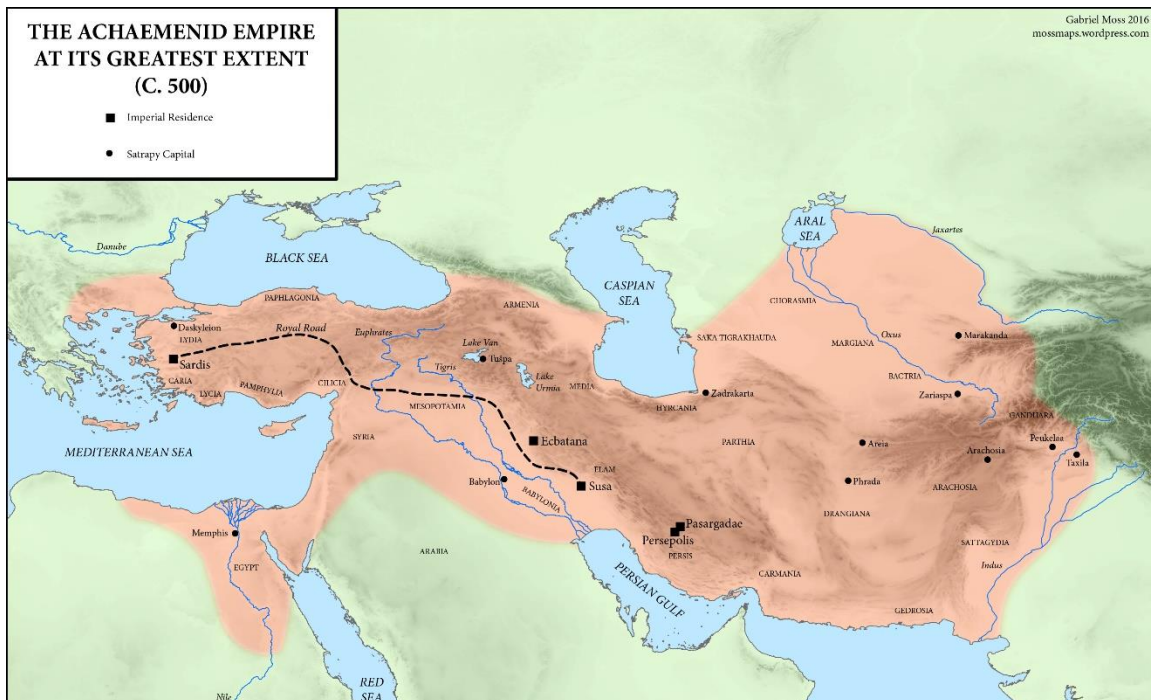
Another controversial book, whose inclusion on the canon was long debated. This poem (or more likely poems) never mentions God but does have some pretty florid and frank language exchanged between two lovers. Its inclusion is based on it being an allegory for the love of God for God's people. Probably written by the Judean community that remained in Persia after the exile.

Origins of the Bible

Part 13 - The World of Jesus

Before we move on to the New Testament, let's dive into a little history to give us some context.

The history presented in the Hebrew scriptures leaves off with the territory of Israel as a province of the Persian empire. This arrangement lasted for several centuries but was undone by the conquering storm that rolled over Persia known as Alexander the Great.

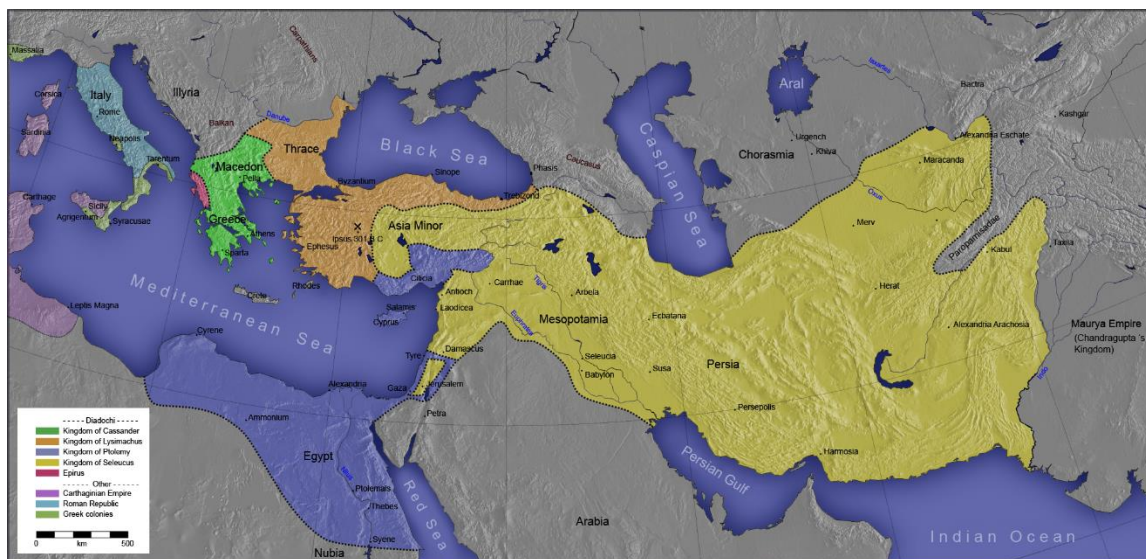


Alexander became the king of Macedon (north of Greece proper) at age 20 in 336. By the age of 30 he was ruler of a larger territory than the later Roman empire which spread from Greece to India and beyond only to die two years later.



At his death, Alexander's empire devolved into conflicting realms ruled by his former leading generals. The territory of Israel found itself caught between two of these successor empires, the Seleucid (in Syria) and the Ptolemaic (in Egypt).

Alexander's goal, beyond the desire for power, was to bring the "gifts" of Greek thought to the whole world. His successors continued this part of his project and their efforts to "Greek-ify" the world is known as Hellenism, and it was spectacularly successful and Greek language and philosophy become predominant throughout the Mediterranean basin and Mesopotamia.



These Hellenizing influences were the source of a great deal of conflict in Israel between those who were open to it and those who were vehemently opposed. In 167BCE, this conflict broke out into violence and a kind of civil war/revolution between traditionalist Jews and Hellenizing Jews supported by the Seleucid emperor.

The leader of the traditionalists, and eventual winner of the conflict was Judah Maccabee. Judah, and his brothers led a guerrilla war against the Hellenizing Jews and Seleucids and eventually wore them down and won autonomy for Israel until its conquest by Rome in 63BCE. The Maccabean revolt led to the establishment of the Hasmonean dynasty (Herod the great was a Hasmonean) which continued to rule well into the first century as client kings of Rome.

The Maccabean revolt led to victory for the traditionalists, but it did not end the larger conflict. It is this conflict between the Hellenizers and Traditionalists that lurks in the background of Jesus' story and the rise of Christianity. In the context of the Bible, the various Herods are Hellenizers, as are the Sadducees (more or less). The Pharisees were the Traditionalists and as we see in the Gospels, actually share many of Jesus' viewpoints (though clearly not all).

The response to the cultural conflict that simmered in the post-Alexandrian world among Jews varied, so that by Jesus' time we see the emergence of several different sects that exist along a continuum of responses. At one end lie the Zealots who sought to emulate the Maccabees and wanted to enforce a strict Torah observance through force and at the other lay the Hasmonean kings who tried on several occasions to water down or even eliminate traditional worship. In between were groups like the Essenes (of the Dead Sea Scrolls) who sought to remove themselves from the larger society and live isolated, self-reliant lives, the Pharisees who focused on a faith focused on extending the Law into every corner of daily life but which had long accommodated itself to peaceful co-existence with non-Jews, and the Sadducees, who were focused primarily on ritual worship but who cooperated actively with foreign rulers.

In the wake of Jesus' death and resurrection, the nascent Christian community, made up wholly of Jews, continued to have these conflicts. We see it in Acts, where there is a conflict in the early community between believers who were from Judea and believers who were from the Jewish diaspora and whether or not their respective widows were being treated equitably. The first seven deacons, including the first martyr, Stephen, all have Greek names.

We see it in the different ways that Stephen and John and Peter are treated by the Council, where Stephen, whom the Bible implies has some issues with Temple worship, is sentenced to death, where the apostles, who still faithfully worship at the Temple are let go with only a stern word of rebuke. Clearly there is a bias at work both among Jerusalem's leaders and within the Christian community against those who are "too" Greek.

So, it would seem that the persecutions in which St Paul was a part was aimed primarily (and ironically) only at those "Christians" who were more Hellenized. We can see this not only in how John and Peter are treated by the authorities, but it can be deduced from the simple fact that the Church leaders remain in Jerusalem for thirty years before they face any serious opposition.

Origins of the Bible

Part 14 – People of “The Way”

As we read in the Acts of the Apostles, and in the genuine letters of Paul, the decades immediately following the Resurrection were a period of rapid expansion of the Jesus movement. By the year 50 or so, communities of Jews who believed that the Messianic age had begun with Jesus’s resurrection were established all around the eastern Mediterranean.

For the most part, all of these people were Jews, and the Jesus movement can be considered another sect of Judaism. However, this belief began to especially spread among a group of people who were closely aligned with Judaism, but who weren’t, themselves, Jewish. These people were known as God-Fearers. These were people who lived their lives in accord with the Mosaic Law, who attended and worshipped at synagogues, who may have even ventured to the Jerusalem for one of the great festivals, but who had not taken all of the steps to fully convert into a Jewish identity (I have to guess circumcision was a significant obstacle).

As some followers of Jesus began to teach that one could join the people of God and receive the benefits of that adoption without the difficult process of becoming a proselyte, these God-Fearers surely saw an amazing opportunity. In the Bible, the story of the eunuch baptized by Philip (the deacon) and that of Cornelius baptized by Peter are examples of God-Fearers, as is the centurion whose servant is healed by Jesus.

We have evidence from non-Biblical sources that this full acceptance of the God Fearers by the followers of Jesus led to conflict between Jesus’ followers and their fellow Jews, especially the Pharisees who were strongest throughout the diaspora. These conflicts often escalated to violence and the general mayhem they caused began to attract the notice of the Roman authorities. It was this conflict that led the Emperor Claudius to expel all the Jews from Rome sometime around the year 52. The contemporary commentator Suetonius wrote of it in his catalogue of the acts of Claudius;

“Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he [the Emperor Claudius] expelled them from Rome.”

It was not until the time of the Judean revolt in the late 60’s though that the growing number of Gentile Jesus followers (who had been God-Fearers) began to separate themselves from their Jewish brothers and sisters.

This inter Jewish conflict between the increasingly Hellenized Jesus movement with its seemingly watered-down Judaism can be seen as a continuation of that much older conflict and the revolt itself is possibly, at least in part, the result of rising tensions between these sects coupled with antagonism towards the imperial policy of religious syncretism as a uniting force.

Origins of the Bible

Part 15 – We are Christians

The Bible tells us that it was in Antioch (in Syria) where the followers of Jesus first came to be called “Christian.” We’ll remember that it is in Antioch that St Paul was first called into leadership by St Barnabas with the support of the apostles in Jerusalem. St Paul’s active ministry began sometime in the late 40’s and lasted about 16 years until his presumed execution during Nero’s persecution around the year 62.

Though the Jewish Revolt widened the chasm between the followers of Jesus and their fellow Jews, a predominantly Jewish Christian branch of the church continued for several centuries, but by the end of the first century the Gentiles were clearly the main stream of Christianity.

It would be a mistake to think of Christianity at the end of the first century as anything like a well-developed organization with a centralized structure and clearly defined ways of doing things. If we were to visit a Christian worship in the year 100, we would see few of the things familiar to us to mark it as “church.” Crosses were not the primary symbol of the faith, there were no Bibles, and probably no Hebrew scripture scrolls either. There probably wouldn’t be an altar because the sacrament of communion was still an actual meal at this point. There would probably be a vessel or location for baptisms, and they would have prayed and sung the psalms.

In [a letter to emperor Trajan](#) in the year 112 from Pliny the Younger (who was a local Roman governor) described the shape of Christian worship;

“they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by oath, not to some crime, but not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so. When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food—but ordinary and innocent food.”

Christianity was, at best, a loose network of affiliated groups who sometimes supported one another but often kept to themselves and occasionally competed. Though systematic persecution didn’t really begin until much later in the third century, Christians were met with suspicion and Christianity was effectively illegal because Christians refused to worship the emperor. Though the Romans were largely tolerant of religious groups, they instituted a policy of emperor worship to provide some religious and civic unity. This made Christians suspects of potential sedition. This helps to explain why Christians largely kept to themselves to limit the potential for trouble. Their secretive practices though also made them convenient scapegoats when things misfortunes (drought, famine, plague, etc.) affected local communities.

As the Christian movement became increasingly made up of Gentiles, some Christians (especially well-educated ones) sought to assimilate Jewish thought with the Greek philosophy they already knew. Early Christianity was especially influenced by the Platonists and the Stoics. Plato (and his teacher, Socrates) had believed in a single supreme source or God for creation which early Christian apologists claimed was the God of the Hebrew Scriptures. Plato also conjectured that reality was a kind of reflection of a perfect realm above this one where the ideal forms of all matter existed. This formulation strongly influenced Christian ideas about heaven. From the Stoics, Christians borrowed an ethic that sought mastery of human passions and a sense of the inherent depravity of the human body.

Another Hellenistic philosophical school which deeply impacted Christianity was the Gnostic movement. Gnosticism comes from the Greek word for knowledge, *gnosis*, and claimed that there was secret knowledge about the true nature of human life available only to a select few.

Gnosticism would present the first great challenge to Christian identity and the response to it would deeply and fundamentally shape Christian practice and belief to the present day.

Origins of the Bible

Part 16 – The Gnostic Challenge

Gnosticism describes a series of overlapping beliefs about human nature, divinity, and creation. It was not exclusively a Christian phenomenon, but Christian Gnosticism was a vibrant variant that had widespread appeal.

Most of what we know about Gnosticism derives from the attacks of its critics, but recent archaeology has begun to turn up some original gnostic created material that is giving us a clearer picture of their beliefs (if not their practices). The lack of evidence is in part from the later churches efforts to destroy it but probably more from the secretive nature of Gnosticism itself. The closest modern parallel to Gnosticism is probably scientology, which is both well known and little understood because of its secretive nature.

Basically, Gnostics, both Christian and otherwise believed that the original design of the universe was as a purely spiritual creation, but that some rogue divinity (in Christian Gnosticism that was Yahweh) either through malice or hubris created the material world and in doing so accidentally trapped some spiritual beings within the material creation. It posits that the highest divinity (in Christian Gnosticism, that's the Father of the Trinity) sent an avatar (Jesus) to share this knowledge and also share the secret steps trapped spirits must take to escape the spiritual realm in order to return to the higher spiritual one. This knowledge (gnosis is the Greek word for knowledge) was to be kept a secret within the group and not shared.

A charismatic teacher named Marcion developed a Gnostic-like belief system and organized a church in the early second century that was a popular alternative. A key belief of this alt-church was that since Yahweh was a malevolent spirit, the Jewish scriptures should be discarded completely and that those who still held to them as valuable (Jews and standard Christians) were a threat to their ascent to the spiritual realm.

At the same time, as awareness of Christianity as a thing separate from Judaism began to grow among the Greco-Roman elite, Christianity came under criticism for its belief systems as well as for its practices. Many people believed that Christians sacrificed and ate babies (the body and blood of the Christ child twisted around) and had incestuous relationships as part of their worship (Christians called one another brother and sister and communion and their gatherings were often referred to as love feasts). There was also a significant class bias at work since most Christians (though not all) were drawn from the less privileged strata of society.

Christian leaders were thus called upon to both defend their beliefs against those who would claim to be followers of Christ but who taught something alien to Jesus and against the

weight of the pagan worlds disdain.

It is from these conflicts that the early church realized a need to define some boundaries for Christian belief and to designate a common corpus of writings that best defended those boundaries. In other words the church developed its creeds and then defined a canon of scripture to defend them.

These arguments swirled around the nature of God, the relationship of Jesus to God, the validity of the Jewish canon, the nature of creation, and human nature. The other central question the early church faced was in the question of authority. Was the gnosis of Jesus something secret he shared with only or two disciples, or was it something public he shared widely and entrusted to many to share further?

The largest group of Christians began to form a consensus around the importance of the witness and work of the apostles (essentially the 12 plus that first generation of leaders like Philip, Paul, Barnabas, etc.). Thus developed a way of thinking that those writings which could be most closely connected, preferably in a clear straight line, to that first generation should have precedence. The Greek term for a straight line is *ortho dox*.

At the middle of the first century, the writings with the clearest connections to the apostolic generation were the gospel books of Mark, Matthew and Luke, the Epistles of Paul, and the books of James and Peter. All the other books that we know of the New Testament, for the most part, already existed, but these formed the core.

Many have wondered why we ended up with four Gospels, especially since they have points of disagreement. Essentially this was one of the ways that the early church sought to position itself over and against Gnosticism. Orthodox Christianity was not the work of a single special messenger with secret knowledge but included the differing perspectives of the many followers of Jesus during his earthly life.

One of the unfortunate side effects of the challenge of the Gnostics was a diminishment of the role of women in the church. Many Gnostic sects had female leaders (since bodies were an evil prison, it didn't matter what form it took – only the spirit inside mattered) and as this was already a challenge in Roman society it added to the movement against female leaders in the church.

Origins of the Bible

Part 17 – the Epistles of Paul

As mentioned above, by the time of the Jesus' earthly ministry, the religious experiences of the people of Israel had changed a great deal. Here is a list of words that show up in the New Testament, but not in the older Hebrew Scriptures.

baptism	Gentile	hell
crucifixion	Jew	Messiah
devil	parable	Pharisee
exorcism	rabbi	Saducee
Samaritan	synagogue	

As we work through the books of the New Testament, we'll follow the action chronologically.

Quiz: What is the earliest book of the New Testament? A. First Thessalonians

As mentioned before, the apostle Paul's ministry career seems to have lasted from about the mid 40's into the early 60's. And given that much of the Acts of the Apostles tells of his story and that the New Testament contains 14 books attributed to him, it is easy to believe that Paul almost single-handedly planted the church across the Mediterranean world. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Paul was one of many followers of Jesus spreading the gospel and urging the formation of self-supporting groups of believers. Some the Bible mentions, most are probably forever lost to history (though not to God). Paul is most closely associated with the ministry to the Gentiles, but the Bible shows us that this effort was already well under way before Paul's active ministry (Philip and Peter are both shown to include Gentiles within the church).

Paul though, was blessed with a good education and an active mind and the letters he wrote to his nascent communities were widely shared, mostly because they are very good! Paul had a large vision and the apparent energy to carry it out coupled with the good fortune to be successful. It probably didn't hurt that as an early-mover in the Gentile conversion space, as Christianity emerged from its Jewish origins, much of what he had to say (and how he said it) resonated with the growing number of non-Jewish believers.

However, not all of the books attributed to him are believed by modern scholars to have been written by him. Of the fourteen which have been credited to him, there is a scholarly consensus around seven of them that they are the real deal. Some others are disputed, and others rejected entirely as being from Paul's hand. These disputes center around things like writing style, vocabulary, theological content, and historical anachronisms.

The Bible organizes the Pauline Epistles by recipient (person or church) and length (longest to shortest) but here they are in chronological order.

Book	Date written	Status
1 st Thessalonians	~51	Undisputed
1 st Corinthians	~53-57	Undisputed
Philippians	~55-57	Undisputed
Philemon	~54-55	Undisputed
Galatians	~55	Undisputed
2 nd Corinthians	~55-58	Undisputed
Romans	~57-58	Undisputed
Colossians	~62-70	Disputed
2 nd Thessalonians	>70	Disputed
Ephesians	~80-90	Disputed
Hebrews	~80-90	Not Paul
1 Timothy	~100	Not Paul
2 Timothy	~100	Not Paul
Titus	~100	Not Paul

Though writing in someone else's name is an affront to our modern sensibilities; it was different for ancient readers. It was apparently common enough to write in another's name that scholars have a name for the phenomenon, *pseudepigrapha*.

They weren't necessarily forgeries intended to deceive and their original readers may have been aware that the attributed author was not the actual author. A parallel for us might be an essay that seeks to express what Lincoln may have thought about our current national situation that draws on things Lincoln actually wrote or said that might address a contemporary problem. Actually, it's the references to situations of the authors day rather than to Paul's that is one of the giveaways in the non-Paul Pauline epistles.

However, later in the second century there is evidence that church leaders began to take a hard line against such writings in another's name as people began doing it more.

Of course, the biggest mystery of Paul's life is his eventual fate. Church tradition has long held that he was martyred in Rome as part of Nero's persecution around the year 62. Neither the Book of Acts nor any other Biblical book tells us. Most scholars today agree with the church tradition that Paul was executed in Rome. As in all things Bible, there are those who disagree with the consensus and believe Paul survived and completed his desire missionary journey to Spain (mentioned in Romans). These are among the scholars who argue that some of the disputed letters are genuine to Paul.

Origins of the Bible

Part 18 – the Gospels

The four gospels are usually separated into two divisions, the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John. As most of you have like already noticed, the story of Jesus depicted by the Synoptics and the story in John differ in some significant aspects. By and large the synoptics follow the same plotline in telling Jesus's story, where John's story differs significantly (like he goes to Jerusalem twice).

A quick survey of Jesus' last 24 hours is a good example:

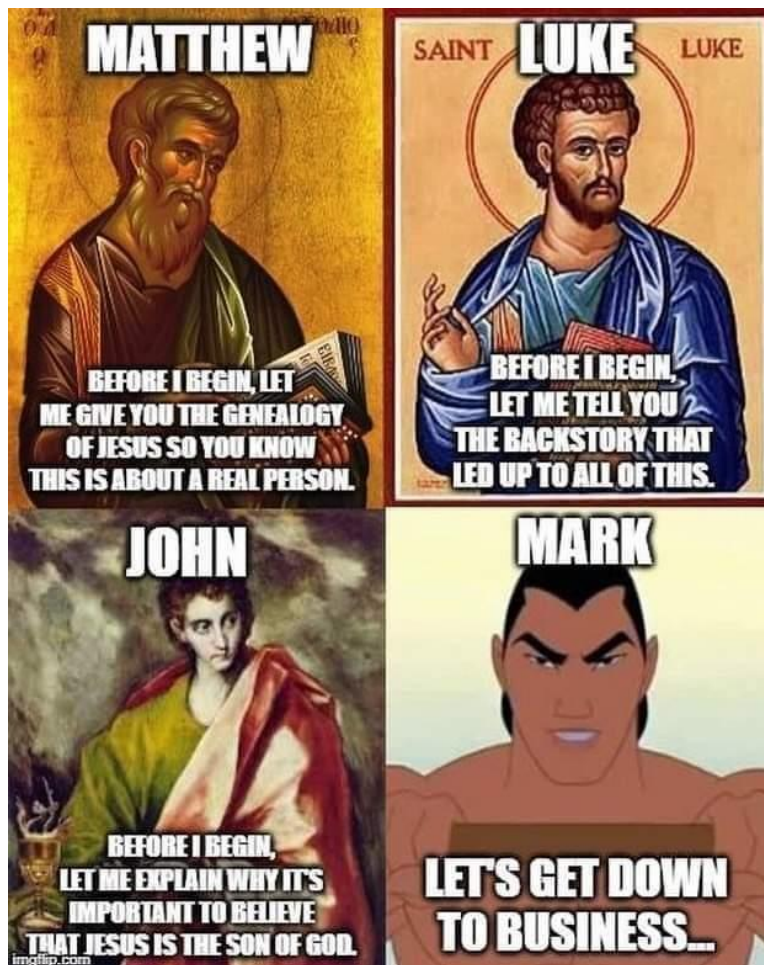
Matthew, Mark, & Luke	John
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Last supper is Passover feast • sharing of bread and wine • prayer at Gethsemane • betrayed with a kiss by Judas • Peter's denials • Jesus arrested by the Council • Jesus before Pilate, Jesus silent, Barabbas released • Jesus crucified 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Last supper is day before Passover • Jesus watches feet of the disciples • Jesus offers a long discourse to the disciples • Jesus prays at the meal • Jesus goes to Gethsemane and is immediately arrested (no kiss) • Jesus arrested by the council • Jesus before Pilate, Jesus has an extended conversation with Pilate • Barabbas released • Jesus crucified

All four, though, relate the same basic story;

- Jesus is baptized by John
- Jesus begins an itinerant ministry of healing and teaching
- Jesus gathers disciples who accompany him on his travels
- Jesus invokes the opposition of government and religious leaders
- Jesus travels to Jerusalem near Passover
- While in Jerusalem, the simmering conflict escalates and the authorities see their chance to rid themselves of Jesus while the Roman governor is in the city.
- Jesus is arrested and executed by the Romans
- Jesus does not stay dead, but on the third day is found to be alive again (*technically Mark left this part out in the original version*)

Though the gospels seek to tell the story of an individual life, they aren't just biographies, and though that person existed in history, they aren't histories either. The gospels are primarily works of theology; they seek to illumine something important about God as shown in the life of this person, Jesus (who, spoiler alert, is *actually* God!)

Meme Digression



The Synoptics

Mark

Let's start with the synoptics. The earliest of these was Mark's gospel, which was probably written sometime in the mid to late 60's. In other words, this gospel seems to have been written *after* some of the most prominent Christian leaders (Paul, Peter, James of Jerusalem) were killed. Given that it was thirty years after Jesus own death, resurrection, and ascension, others likely had died of more natural causes as well. We may well assume it was written in response to the loss of that first generation as it suddenly became urgent to capture their more first hand knowledge of Jesus, his life and his teachings.

But where did Mark get his information? By and large we do not know. We actually don't know who Mark was or if the author's name really was Mark. Scholars surmise from the text that the Mark wrote for a community of believers who may have been a mix of Jews and Gentiles but who had never visited Jerusalem or Palestine and who did not speak Aramaic, so perhaps a community in Rome. It should also be noted that Mark, like all of the New Testament was written in Greek; and apparently the Greek of Mark's author is very bad, as if he was only barely able to speak it.

Many scholars believe that Mark constructed his gospel from two sources, an oral tradition that provided the basic structure of the story and source (probably written) that just had sayings of Jesus (there are ancient references to such a book). His genius was in matching the sayings to specific episodes of the story of Jesus. Scholars often call this second source, the book of sayings, as "Q" from the German word for "source," "Quelle."

Matthew

Matthew was, by tradition believed to be the earliest gospel, written by Matthew the tax collector, but this tradition only emerges later in the 2nd century and the consensus today is that Matthew (not really Matthew) expanded Mark's book with material that was known in his community.

Drawing from the text itself, it is believed that the author of Matthew was a well educated Jewish Christian (perhaps a scribe or synagogue leader) most likely in a city in the eastern Mediterranean where there were large communities of Jews still after the Jewish war. Matthew's gospel has long been associated with Antioch. Given that it is believed he had a copy of Mark, Matthew would have been written sometime after the mid-70's, though probably not too much after.

As well as Mark's gospel, Matthew may have also had access to the Q source as well as additional stories about Jesus that apparently weren't known by Mark. Scholars call this additional material the "M" source.

Luke

alone among the four gospels, Luke may have actually written by the person whose name is attached to it. The gospel of Luke is the first part of a two-volume work that comprises Luke and Acts of the Apostles. Luke, of course, was one of Paul's companions, as mentioned by Paul in his letter to Philemon (also in the disputed letters of Col and 2Ti). Luke seems to have travelled with Paul and sections of Acts are written from a first person perspective.

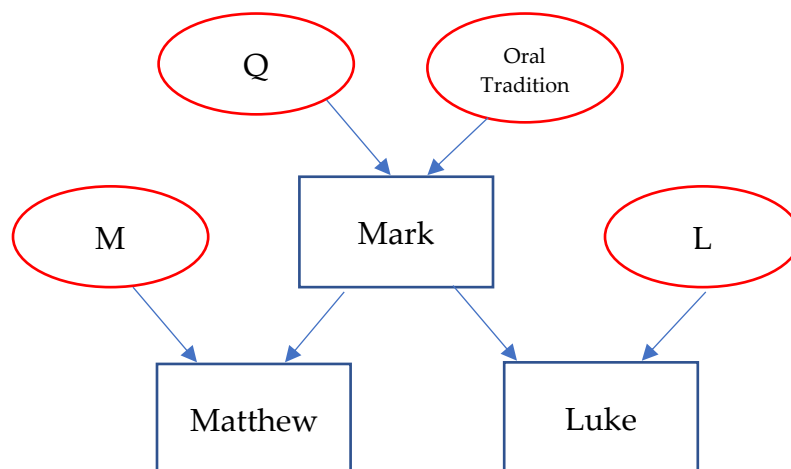
If Luke is the actual author, he was almost certainly a Gentile (Luke is a Latin name and it is implied in Colossians). And judging from the writing, both style and content, Luke was definitely well educated with a knowledge of the classics and philosophy. Like Matthew, Luke seems to have had a copy of Mark, perhaps Q and other material as well (known as "L"). In fact, Luke tells us he did research in writing his book and collected eyewitness accounts while also mentioning others who had written accounts of Jesus and the early church.

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.

Luke 1:1-4

Luke's work seems to be aimed at an individual (Theophilus) and this may have been a patron of Luke's work or it could be a generic follower of Jesus (Theophilus means "lover of God"). There aren't any clues in the text about where it may have been written, but it seems that Luke intended for his work to be broadly disseminated. It could be considered one of the first works of Christian Apology, a genre that seeks to explain Christianity to those outside of the community.

Synoptic Gospel Formation Process



John's Gospel

Quiz – how often is the disciple John mentioned by name in John's gospel? A: Zero!

John's gospel has long been a favorite among Christians, and it is a remarkable piece of literature. The current consensus is that this masterpiece developed through several stages into the book we have today. The book itself is presented as the witness of the beloved disciple who many, over time, have associated with John, the son of Zebedee. Some scholars propose that the core of the book is just such a testimony that was expanded upon over time within a community founded by John.

But others have proposed other possibilities, Martin Luther thought the beloved disciple was Lazarus. One argument against the disciple John is that a simple Galilean fisherman would not have been capable of such a literary masterpiece (in Greek, no less). The ancient church historian Eusebius said that John the apostle's witness was expanded by one of his disciples known as John the Elder (who also wrote the Johannine epistles) into the gospel we have today.

The author of John either did not have access to the synoptics or their sources or chose to ignore them as it contains mostly material unique to itself.

Given the common and almost universally negative references to "Jews" within John, most scholars date its final form to a period when conflict between Jewish followers of Jesus were most deeply in conflict with those Jews who were building on the foundations of the Pharisees to construct modern Judaism was at its height, so probably in the 90's. Again this was probably in the eastern Mediterranean and the gospel tradition has long associated this book with the city of Ephesus.

Origins of the Bible

Part 19 the Other Epistles

Aside from those letters either written by or attributed to St Paul, there are several additional Epistles. So what is an Epistle anyway? We sometimes call them letters; like what you may have sent to your parents from summer camp. But they aren't exactly like that. Most of the letters we write (or have written) are *private* correspondence. We only intend them for the recipient. Epistles, on the other hand are letters written for *public* consumption. They are meant to embody the author to people far away, and they were meant to be read aloud to a gathering. Epistles manifested the authority and presence of the sender. Once we remember that there wasn't a post office, that papyrus was relatively expensive and that only about a third of the population could read and write, we can appreciate how powerful a written statement from someone might be.

These are the Epistles we will be working through; Hebrews, James, 1Peter, 2Peter, 1John, 2John, 3John, and Jude.

Hebrews

Though this was attributed to Paul in the KJV, as we discussed before, no one really believes it was written by Paul. The author's identity isn't mentioned in the text itself and ancient writers who reference it do not connect it with Paul either (it is first mentioned by St Clement ca 96CE).

Hebrews appears to have been written relatively early, the author was likely a contemporary of St Paul's. There is a good argument from the way it talks about sacrifices as occurring in the present, to suggest it was written before the Jewish War and the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple.

It's Greek is highly polished and the arguments it puts forth in favor of Christ employ advanced rhetorical strategies that suggest the letter was written by a well-educated person. Many scholars believe it is actually not a true Epistle, but more of a sermon with a personal note attached at the end.

It's anonymity actually worked against its inclusion in the canon. It is often missing or openly dismissed in ancient lists of worthy books. However, it's excellent theology and well-reasoned arguments (as well as its ancient provenance) eventually led early church leaders to accept it as the work of the apostolic generation and scriptural.

James

Like Hebrews, the “epistle” from James reads more like a treatise or sermon than a letter. It has long been attributed to James of Jerusalem, the brother of Jesus who was the early leader of the church (Paul’s letters, Acts, Josephus) and not the disciple James, brother of John.

The name of Jesus is mentioned only twice in this letter, but much of it seems to be direct quotes of Jesus’ sayings which, curiously, aren’t attributed to Jesus but presented as the teachings of the author (keep in mind, none of the gospels were written yet, though the mysterious “Q” source of sayings may have).

Rather than relying on the authority of Jesus, James tries to appeal to common sense and is written in a very personal style that suggests a conversation. In this way, people have long drawn parallels with the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Scriptures (proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Wisdom of Solomon, and Sirach).

This was probably written in the period after Stephen’s stoning and was intended not for a specific community, but to the numerous Christian groups that had been formed by those fleeing persecution in Judea. Since James was executed in 62CE, the letter (if he wrote it) must have been written before then, with likely date range from the late 40’s to the mid 50’s.

Though James was considered canonical from early on, Martin Luther hated the book and argued to have it removed from the canon.

“We should throw the epistle of James out of this school, for it doesn’t amount to much. It contains not a syllable about Christ. Not once does it mention Christ, except at the beginning. I maintain that some Jew wrote it who probably heard about Christian people but never encountered any. Since he heard that Christians place great weight on faith in Christ, he thought, ‘Wait a moment! I’ll oppose them and urge works alone.’ This he did.”

I think Luther was more deeply inspired by his rabid anti-Semitism, than his theology in this case.

1Peter

St Peter was probably the most celebrated of all Jesus’ disciples and reliable tradition has him as leader of Christians in the city of Rome until his death. In the first century, many things were written that claimed Peter as the author; there was a Gospel of Peter, an Acts of Peter, and even the Apocalypse of Peter, none of which were actually written by him, and all of which were ultimately rejected by the church. This letter though is generally considered genuine. If not written by Peter himself, then it was composed by close companions shortly after his death who accurately reflected Peter’s thoughts. What’s most remarkable about Peter’s letter is that there’s nothing unique or remarkable about it. Peter’s teachings seem to reflect the deeply committed but somewhat dull fellow described in the gospels.

2 Peter

Unlike 1 Peter, 2 Peter isn't believed to be Peter's genuine work; in fact, it appears most likely to be a reworking of the Epistle of Jude (19 of Jude's 26 verses are in 2 Peter). Though the letter may have been written earlier, it doesn't get mentioned by anyone in any surviving texts until the third century and many ancient church leaders didn't think it worthy, though it finally was accepted because of its spurious connection to Peter.

Johannine Letters (1John, 2John, 3 John)

1 John is the only book of the Bible where it explicitly says that God is love (1John 4:8 & 16). The author of these works is not named in the text other than his self-identification as "the elder." They came to be called associated with the disciple John, son of Zebedee because of their strong similarities to that gospel.

As we noted before, the Gospel of John is believed to have John's testament at its core (the basic narrative) with editorial editions that fleshed out the theological perspective. Many scholars believe that the author of these letters (and most believe they have a single author) was one of those editors, perhaps someone known from other evidence as John the elder, who was a disciple of John the disciple. This would suggest that these letters were written near the end of the first century, perhaps in the 90's.

The letter itself seems to be addressing conflict within a set of interrelated congregations whose conflict is likely about differing interpretations of the gospel of John itself and may represent a schism within the community related to Gnostic teachings (based on what the letter decry and what the commend).

Jude

The letter itself announces that it is from Jude, but who exactly this Jude is, is not explicitly stated. In Greek, the name is *Ioudas*, which can be translated as Jude, Judah, or Judas of which there are several examples in the Bible. This letter has always been associated with Judas, the brother of Jesus (Matt 13:55 & Mk 6:3). Like James, Jude is believed to have become a follower of his brother after His resurrection and Paul mentions in 1Corinthians that they have become missionaries who travel with their wives. Though Jude is not well known to us today, he seems to have been an important leader in the early church, and the ancient church historian, Eusebius, reports that his descendants were still leaders in the church into the second century. There is no tradition of martyrdom for Jude and given that he was a younger brother of Jesus, probably the youngest since he is always listed last, this letter could have been written at any point in the first century. Because of its emphasis on the imminence of Jesus' return, many believe that it is like earlier than later (when that understanding began to wane) and date it to the 50's or 60's.

Origins of the Bible

Part 20 Revelation of John

Revelation is unlike anything else in the New Testament. It is a letter, a prophecy, and also an apocalypse. Apocalypses were a popular genre in the ancient world that was developed among Jewish people in the period after the exile. Apocalyptic elements can be detected in the prophetic books of Joel and Zechariah, while Isaiah chapters 24–27 and 33 present well-developed apocalypses. The Book of Daniel offers a fully matured and classic example of this genre of literature. These are symbol-rich works that speak to groups of people who are experiencing crises that offer reassurance of divine support. They usually have incredible imagery of things and worlds beyond human experience such as fantastic beasts and spiritual beings. They also usually claim to offer some insight into the divine mind, most often through a mystical experience.

Though Apocalypses often make prophetic claims about the future, they mostly speak about the situation in the time they were written. In this they are very much like the very popular sci-fi genre of dystopian novels and movies; crafting a future that is the possible extension of a perceived problem of today.

The text claims that it is the work, a recorded vision, by someone named John who lives on Patmos, an island in the Aegean Sea. Historically, we know that Patmos was a place Roman authorities often used as a place to house exiles. So, it is reasonable to assume that this John has been sent here because he was deemed a troublemaker wherever he was from. The book notes seven cities, all of which are in the Roman province of Asia (modern Turkey) so it seems likely that John was from there too.

Even the early church rejected any idea that this John is the same as John the apostle or the same person who wrote the Gospel of John or the Johannine letters. Linguistic scholarship suggests the book was written by someone whose native language was Aramaic, so he was probable originally from Judea or Gallilee; perhaps he was one of the Christians who fled from there after the stoning of Stephen or in response to the Jewish war. There is some suggestion that he was a notable Christian leader in Asia because he says he would be regarded as a prophet there (1:3 and 22:7).

The tradition about this book was that it was written late in the first century, most likely during the reign of the Emperor Domitian, who was especially keen on emperor worship though he was not quite as cruelly disposed towards Christians as his predecessor Nero was in the 60's. The book also suggests the growing tension between followers of Jesus and other Jewish people, which lends credence to the theory of a creation in the late first century.

Like Hebrews, there was great deal of debate in the first several centuries about this book and whether or not it was worthy for Christians to read. Despite its weirdness, it has always been a popular book among the laity and it does truly offer some beautiful expressions of Christian hope.

Origins of the Bible

Part 21 Putting It All Together

Christianity in the first three hundred years was a fragmented movement encompassing a wide range of perspectives and beliefs. Given its questionable legal status, it was sometimes difficult for Christian communities to communicate with one another and nearly impossible for its widespread leaders to ever have gathered. The work of defining the core understandings of the nature of God and Jesus and their relationship, as well as what the Christian response to that understanding should be, took most of the energy of the church into the fourth century.

In this period there was no official canon of scripture beyond the works shared from Judaism that we call the Old Testament. As different leaders made different arguments they drew on written works that supported their views. As we already discussed, Christians gradually came to hold that material produced by the first generation of believers, who were closer to Jesus' earthly mission, was of primary value. Over time, a consensus began to arise about what books were most reliably connected to the apostles, and therefore most reliable for evidence to support one's theological arguments.

By the year 200, Irenaeus, a famous early church theologian was championing 21 of the current 27 books that would be the New Testament (he left out Philemon, Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 3 John and Jude). From around the same time, we have a copy of a list known as the Muratorian Fragment, that includes much of the current New Testament (excluding Matthew, Mark, all of the general epistles except Jude) plus some extras like the Apocalypse of Peter.

The idea that there was an emerging canon though is confirmed by a decree from Emperor Constantine that 50 copies of Christian scripture be provided for the churches of Constantinople in the year 331. Eusebius, the early church historian, was the bishop charged with making that happen.

The first example of a list that exactly matches the current New Testament was the Easter letter of St Athanasius in the year 367 while he was bishop of Alexandria who wrote;

Continuing, I must without hesitation mention the scriptures of the New Testament; they are the following: the four Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, after them the Acts of the Apostles and the seven so-called catholic epistles of the apostles -- namely, one of James, two of Peter, then three of John and after these one of Jude. In addition there are fourteen epistles of the apostle Paul written in the following order: the first to the Romans, then two to the Corinthians and then after these the one to the Galatians, following it the one to the Ephesians, thereafter the one to the Philippians and the one to the Colossians and two to the Thessalonians and the epistle to

the Hebrews and then immediately two to Timothy , one to Titus and lastly the one to Philemon. Yet further the Revelation of John

These are the springs of salvation, in order that he who is thirsty may fully refresh himself with the words contained in them. In them alone is the doctrine of piety proclaimed. Let no one add anything to them or take anything away from them...

But for the sake of greater accuracy I add, being constrained to write, that there are also other books besides these, which have not indeed been put in the canon, but have been appointed by the Fathers as reading-matter for those who have just come forward and which to be instructed in the doctrine of piety: the Wisdom of Solomon, the Wisdom of Sirach, Esther, Judith, Tobias, the so-called Teaching [Didache] of the Apostles, and the Shepherd. And although, beloved, the former are in the canon and the latter serve as reading matter, yet mention is nowhere made of the apocrypha; rather they are a fabrication of the heretics, who write them down when it pleases them and generously assign to them an early date of composition in order that they may be able to draw upon them as supposedly ancient writings and have in them occasion to deceive the guileless.

This list was made official in Rome at a council in 382 (which also charged St Jerome with translating all it into Latin in an edition known as the Vulgate), and in North Africa by the Synod of Hippo in 393 (while Augustine was bishop). The great eastern sees hesitated on including the Revelation of John, but by the early fifth century, all the bishops of the church had come around to the current New Testament.

In the Western schism known as the Protestant Reformation, each side sought to assert the authority of scripture for their positions. Each also clarified their acceptance of the received canon. The Roman Catholic Church affirmed the New Testament at the Council of Trent in 1546, the Reformed Churches Calvinist) affirmed it in 1559 as part of the Gallic Confession, and the Anglican Church did so in the 39 Articles in 1563 (Article VI, BCP p868). The Westminster Confession also affirmed the canon of the New Testament and was accepted by groups which became the Congregationalists, Baptists, and Presbyterians. Curiously, the Lutherans never formally defined the canon and in that tradition, the canon is technically “open.”