

### 3. WHAT IS THE BIBLE

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1. “Faith comes by hearing” (Romans 10:17)
2. The way God makes himself known to us, reaches us, persuades us, is by talking to us.
3. Jesus never wrote anything, the only thing we have from him is the oral, then written *testimony* of those who lived with him – what they share with us is what they experienced:

“That which was from the beginning, which **we have heard**, which we have **seen** with our eyes, which we have **looked at** and our hands have **touched**—this we **proclaim** concerning the Word of life [...]. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have **fellowship** with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete”. (1 John 1:1-4)
4. There is one fundamental reason for this – linked to the very identity of God:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1.1)
5. John is not only saying that God speaks, but that he is *speaking*, that is “eager to make himself known by communicating, telling, entreating, persuading” – all things he constantly does in Scripture.
6. With Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Ezekiel, what God does is enter into a dialogue with humanity.

#### What the Bible is not

- 6.1. It is not a book.
- 6.2. It is not a set of historical documents in the modern sense of the word, that is
  - i. reporting events
  - ii. which can be attested by multiple contemporary sources
  - iii. and for which it is possible to establish a precise chronology
- 6.3. It is not the Word of God.
- 6.4. It is not written by God, nor dictated by God.

#### Authorship

7. If you take what Scripture says about itself, you are told that
  - 7.1. The books of Moses (the Pentateuch) were written by Moses
  - 7.2. The Psalms were composed by King David
  - 7.3. The book of Proverbs by Solomon
  - 7.4. The book of Isaiah by the prophet Isaiah
  - 7.5. The Pauline letters by Paul and so on.

8. There is a consensus among researchers however that these books and letters are not the product of a single author but of several generations of writers, each reworking texts produced by others or handed down orally.

## Chronology

9. The Book of Exodus attempts to ground the event firmly in history,
  - 9.1. dating the exodus to the 2666th year after creation (creation is supposed to have happened in 4004 BCE)

“Now the time that the sons of Israel lived in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years. And at the end of four hundred and thirty years, to the very day, all the hosts of the LORD went out from the land of Egypt” (Exodus 12:40-41)
  - 9.2. stating that the Israelites dwelled in Egypt for 430 years (Exodus 12:40-41), and including place names such as Goshen (Gen. 46:28), Pithom and Ramesses (Exod. 1:11), as well as stating that 600,000 Israelite men were involved (Exodus 12:37).
10. Which gives roughly the following chronology
  - 10.1. 13th C. BCE Exodus from Egypt. **Exodus.**
  - 10.2. 1250-1200 BCE Gradual conquest of Palestine. **Entry in the Promised Land.**
  - 10.3. 1020-922 BCE Kingdom of Israel united under Saul (crowned 1020), David, and Solomon. **The Kingdom of Israel.**
  - 10.4. 959-952 BCE Building of the Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. **The First Temple.**
  - 10.5. 597 -538 BCE exile to Babylon. **The Exile**
  - 10.6. 538 BCE Cyrus issues edict allowing the repatriation of the exiles. He pursues a policy of local identity and self-rule. **The Post-Exilic Period.**
  - 10.7. 520 - 515 The Jerusalem Temple is rebuilt with the encouragement of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah and the assistance of Persia. **The Second Temple**
  - 10.8. 67 BCE The Romans take Jerusalem.
  - 10.9. During the Roman conquest, Pompey entered (63 BCE) the Holy of Holies but left the Temple intact. In 54 BCE, however, Crassus plundered the Temple treasury. The rebuilding of the Second Temple begun by Herod the Great, king (37 BCE–4 CE) of Judaea. Construction began in 20 BCE and lasted for 46 years.
  - 10.10. c. 0-30 CE Jesus of Nazareth.
  - 10.11. 70 CE The Romans **destroy the Second Temple** rebuilt by Herod after a revolt and the Diaspora begins in earnest. Earliest possible period of the complete canonization of the Hebrew Bible.
  - 10.12. 135 CE After the Bar-Kochba revolt the Romans prohibit Jews from Judea.
11. From the viewpoint of historical chronology the starting point that can be attested with certainty is **the exile to Babylon**. A tablet discovered in Babylon mentions rations of oil given to Jehoiachin, king of Judah and five his sons. It is dated to the 13th regnal year of Nebuchadnezzar II, 592 B.C.E.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.asor.org/onetoday/2015/05/new-sources-and-insights-on-judeans-in-the-babylonian-exile/>

12. More recently (1993) the Tel Dan Stele is a fragmentary stele containing a Canaanite inscription which dates to the 9th century BCE. It is notable for possibly being the most significant and perhaps the only extra-biblical archaeological reference **to the house of David**.<sup>2</sup>

### The text

13. Jewish bible
  - 13.1. Torah
  - 13.2. Prophets
  - 13.3. The writings
14. The original language of the OT is predominantly **Hebrew**, though there are few sections in Aramaic (the lingua franca of the Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian empires (whereas Hebrew is the language of Palestine)).
  - 14.1. Hebrew and Aramaic are written without vowels
  - 14.2. A school of scribes called the Masorets who worked from 500 to 1000 CE recorded the traditional pronunciation of the Hebrew language by adding pointing, that is signs indicating vowels.
15. Between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE (end of Second Temple) many Jewish communities used **Greek** as their main language, especially after the conquests of Alexander the Great (d. 323 BCE).
  - 15.1. According to a legend the task of translating the bible into Greek was entrusted to 72 scholars, hence the name of Septuaginta
16. For a long time the earliest manuscripts of the Hebrew bible could be traced back to the **ninth century CE**. The three most important manuscripts are the
  - 16.1. Cairo Codex (prophets only) written in 896 CE
  - 16.2. The Aleppo Codes, c. 930 CE
  - 16.3. The Leningrad Codex, 1009 CE – a complete text of the Hebrew bible which had become the standard text which modern printed Bibles take as their basis.
17. The **Dead Sea Scrolls**
  - 17.1. The Dead Sea Scrolls (also the Qumran Caves Scrolls) are ancient Jewish and Hebrew religious manuscripts discovered between 1946 and 1956
  - 17.2. Dating from the 3rd century BCE to the 1st century CE<sup>3</sup>
  - 17.3. About 40% are copies of texts from the Hebrew Scriptures and they confirm the accuracy of the Leningrad code.

### Content and literary genres

18. Narrative
  - 18.1. History, legend, saga, myth, folktale and fictions
19. Law
  - 19.1. Book of the Covenant (Ex 21-24)
  - 19.2. Holiness Code (Lev 17-26)
  - 19.3. Deuteronomic legislation (Deut 12-26)

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<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tel\\_Dan\\_stele](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tel_Dan_stele)

<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dead\\_Sea\\_Scrolls](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dead_Sea_Scrolls)

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- 19.4. At the heart of all the Law are the Ten Commandments (Ex 20, Deut 5) which are expanded by the rest of the legislation.
  - 19.5. These laws have much in common with the laws of other nations in the ancient Near East, such as the Code of Hammurabi.
  - 19.6. But they differ strikingly because of the higher valuation of human life, much more interest in regulations concerning worship, greater tendency to lay down general principles.
  - 19.7. The laws are understood as the foundation of the relationship of Israel with God (the 'Covenant') – which was unusual in the ancient world.
  - 19.8. Moreover, especially in Deuteronomy, the law is the subject of meditation and delight.
20. Hymns and Psalms
- 20.1. Hard to date, they might have been used in the Temple of Solomon.
21. Wisdom – three kinds
- 21.1. Proverbs: saying and aphorisms which draw moral and practical conclusions from aspects of daily life.
  - 21.2. Wisdom is personified as a kind of goddess (Prov 8:22-26)
  - 21.3. Mantic wisdom, ex. dreams of Joseph in Genesis and in the book of Daniel.
22. Prophecy
- 22.1. Oracles, which denounce current evil or predict what Yahweh will do in response to human conduct.
  - 22.2. Sometimes the prophets' visions convey divine revelation in an 'apocalyptic form', cf Daniel.

## Themes

23. Monotheism
- 23.1. There are occasional survivals of polytheistic systems (Ps 82).
  - 23.2. Much of the pre-exilic period is presented as one of warfare between Yahweh and the gods of Canaan for Israel's allegiance.
  - 23.3. But for Israel there can be only one God.
24. Creation: Yahweh is constantly presented as the God who created the world
25. Covenant
- 25.1. At some point in history God entered into a relationship with his people which had somehow the nature of a contract
  - 25.2. Sinai and Moses.
26. Redemption
- 26.1. God saves his people from Egypt.
27. Ethics
- 27.1. God makes moral demands on Israel and on all human beings.
  - 27.2. A strong commitment to social justice.
  - 27.3. A deep concern for ritual purity.
28. Theodicy
- 28.1. In polytheism it is easy to explain disasters that befall to humans: they are the result of disagreements among the gods

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- 28.2. Exile, crises, Lamentations, Jeremiah, Ezekiel.

### Themes connecting the OT to the NT

#### 29. Messiah

- 29.1. Israel had priests, kings, and prophets
- i. all anointed, 'Messiahs', "christoi" from the Greek From χρίω (khrīō, "to rub, ceremonially anoint")
  - ii. but they were all unfaithful in the end, or inadequate.
- 29.2. A tendency begins which points to a future priest, king, and prophet who will be effective and faithful.
- 29.3. The figures are progressively unified in one Messiah
- 29.4. Main point of connection with Jesus who presents himself as the Messiah, prophet, king, and priest.

#### 30. Purity

- 30.1. Sacrificial system, search for purity, initially understood as ceremonial and external, progressively interiorized.
- 30.2. Jesus transfers purity radically in the heart and identifies it with *love*.

#### 31. Blessing

- 31.1. Initially reserved to the people of Israel, the descendants of Abraham.
- 31.2. Vocation of Israel to be the means through which the blessings is extended to the whole of humanity.
- 31.3. Realized in Jesus.

### Canon

32. From the Greek κανών kanōn, meaning "rule" or "measuring stick". The biblical canon is the list of the books which are considered as part of the Bible.
33. Different religious groups include different books in their biblical canons, in varying orders, and sometimes divide or combine books.
- 33.1. The Jewish Tanakh (sometimes called the Hebrew Bible) contains **24 books** divided into three parts:
- i. the five books of the Torah ("teaching");
  - ii. the eight books of the Nevi'im ("prophets");
  - iii. and the eleven books of Ketuvim ("writings").
- 33.2. The Old Testament for Christians contains,
- i. at minimum, the 24 books of the Hebrew Bible but divided into
  - ii. 39 (Protestant) or
  - iii. 46 (Catholic) books and ordered differently.
- 33.3. The New Testament contains 27 books:
- i. the four canonical gospels,
  - ii. Acts of the Apostles,
  - iii. 21 Epistles or letters and
  - iv. the Book of Revelation.
34. In rabbinic Judaism the process of canonization occurred between 200 BC and 200 AD, and a popular position is that the Torah was canonized c. 400 BC, the Prophets c. 200 BC, and the Writings c. 100 AD perhaps at a hypothetical Council of Jamnia

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(which is also supposed to have decided to exclude believers in Jesus as the Messiah from synagogue attendance, as referenced by interpretations of John 9:22:

“His parents said these things because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had agreed already that if anyone confessed that He was Christ, he would be put out of the synagogue”.

35. The Early Church used the Old Testament, namely the Septuagint (LXX) among Greek speakers.
36. The Apostles did not otherwise leave a defined set of new scriptures; instead, the New Testament developed over time.
  - 36.1. The Pauline epistles were circulating in collected forms by the end of the 1st century AD.
  - 36.2. Justin Martyr, in the early 2nd century, mentions the "memoirs of the Apostles", which Christians (Greek: Χριστιανός) called "gospels", and which were considered to be authoritatively equal to the Old Testament.
37. **Marcion** (c. 140 CE) was the first Christian leader in recorded history (though later considered heretical) to propose and delineate a uniquely Christian canon This included 10 epistles from Paul, as well as an edited version of the Gospel of Luke, which today is known as the Gospel of Marcion.
38. The initial impetus for the Christian project of canonization flowed from opposition to the list produced by Marcion.
39. Irenaeus (c. 200 CE) is one of the first witnesses to the four-gospel canon.

### Some reflections on the way Scripture as we know it was put together

Rachel Held Evans, *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again* (2018)

40. “Our Bible was forged from a crisis of faith”.
41. “In the sixth century BC, King Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem, destroying both the city and its temple. Many of the Jews who lived there were taken captive and forced into the empire’s service. Others remained, but without a king, without a place of worship, without a national identity. This catastrophic event threw everything the people of Israel believed about themselves and about their God into question. Many assumed their collective sins were to blame and that with repentance their honor might be restored. Others feared God had abandoned them completely. Priests wondered how to conduct rituals and sacrifices without a temple or an altar, and parents worried their children would grow enamored by the wealth and power of Babylon and forget their own people’s most cherished values.
42. “It should come as no surprise to any writer that all this emotional suffering produced some quality literature. Jewish scribes got to work, pulling together centuries of oral and written material and adding reflections of their own as they wrestled through this national crisis of faith. If the people of Israel no longer had their own land, their own king, or their own temple, what did they have?
  - 42.1. They had their stories.
  - 42.2. They had their songs.
  - 42.3. They had their traditions and laws.
  - 42.4. They had the promise that the God who set all of creation in order, who told Abraham his descendants would outnumber the stars, who rescued the

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Hebrews from slavery, who spoke to them from Mount Sinai, and who turned a shepherd boy into a king, would remain present with them no matter what.

- 42.5. This God would be faithful”.
43. “Today we still return to our roots in times of crisis; we look to the stories of our origins to make sense of things, to remember who we are”.
44. “Contrary to what many of us are told, Israel’s origin stories weren’t designed to answer scientific, twenty-first-century questions about the beginning of the universe or the biological evolution of human beings, but rather were meant to answer then-pressing, ancient questions about the nature of God and God’s relationship to creation.”
45. “Even the story of Adam and Eve, found in Genesis 2 and 3, is thought by many scholars to be less a story about human origins and more a story about Israel’s origins, a symbolic representation of Israel’s pattern of habitation, disobedience, and exile, set in primeval time”.
46. “My friend Kerlin, an Episcopal priest with blue hair, once said the thing she loves most about the Bible is that it sweeps her into an epic story in which she is not the central character. As much as we may wish them to be, our present squabbles over science, politics, and public school textbooks were not on the minds of those Jewish scribes seeking to assure an oppressed and scattered people they were still beloved by God. To demand that the Bible meet our demands is to put ourselves and our own interests at the center of the story, which is one of the first traps we must learn to avoid if we are to engage the Bible with integrity or care. Indeed, one cannot seriously engage the origin stories of the Pentateuch—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—without encountering ancient and foreign assumptions about the nature of reality”.
47. “While the circumstances of the exiled Israelites may seem far removed from us today, the questions raised by that national crisis of faith remain as pressing as ever:
- 47.1. Why do bad things happen to good people?
- 47.2. Will evil and death continue to prevail?
- 47.3. What does it mean to be chosen by God?
- 47.4. Is God faithful? Is God present?
- 47.5. Is God good?
48. Rather than answering these questions in propositions, the Spirit spoke the language of stories, quickening the memories of prophets and the pens of scribes to call a lost and searching people to gather together and remember:
- Remember how in the beginning, God put everything in order and made the whole cosmos a temple? Remember how we are created in God’s image, as stewards, not slaves? Remember how Adam and Eve disobeyed, how Cain and Abel fought, how all the people of the earth grew so rebellious and cruel that God regretted creating the world in the first place? Remember how one family’s faithfulness was enough to save them from the Great Flood? Remember how God promised an elderly Abraham his descendants would outnumber the stars? Remember how Sarah laughed? Remember how God chose a peopleless nomad, a second-born son, a stuttering runaway, and a little shepherd boy to create, liberate, and rule a nation? Remember how that nation is named for a man who limped from wrestling with God? Remember how God saw the suffering of the banished Hagar, the unloved Leah, and the oppressed Hebrew slaves? Remember how Pharaoh’s mighty army drowned in the sea? Remember

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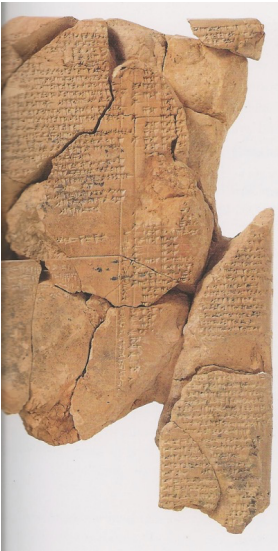
the desert? Remember the manna? Remember the water from rock? Remember how it is our God who said, “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine” (Isaiah 43:1 NRSV)? Remember how this God has been faithful?

49. This collective remembering produced the Bible as we know it and explains why it looks the way it does—foreign yet familiar, sacred yet indelibly smudged with human fingerprints. The Bible’s original readers may not share our culture, but they share our humanity, and the God they worshipped invited them to bring that humanity to their theology, prayers, songs, and stories.”
50. “What both hardened fundamentalists and strident atheists seem to have in common is the conviction that any trace of myth, embellishment, or cultural influence in an origin story renders it untrue”.
51. “We meet God in narrative too. The origin stories of Scripture remind us we belong to a very large and very old family that has been walking with God from the beginning. Even when we falter and fall, this God is in it for the long haul. We will not be abandoned”.



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**A tablet from Babylon dated to the 13th regnal year of Nebuchadnezzar II (592 B.C.E.), mentioning rations of oil given to Jehoiachin king of Judah and his sons. Berlin, Vorderasiatisches Museum, VAT 16283+**



**Tel Dan Stele, Israel Museum. Highlighted in white: the sequence B Y T D W D.**

### Translation

[ ]...[ ] and cut [ ] [ ] my father went up [against him when h]e fought at [ ] and my father lay down, he went to his [ancestors (viz. became sick and died)]. And the king of I[s-]rael entered previously in my father's land, [and] Hadad made me king, And Hadad went in front of me, [and] I departed from the seven [ ] s of my kingdom, and I slew [seve]nty kin[gs], who harnessed th[ousands of cha-] riots and thousands of horsemen (or: horses). [I killed Jeho]ram son [of Ahab] king of Israel, and [I] killed [Ahaz]jahu son of [Jehoram kin-] g of **the House of David**, and I set [their towns into ruins and turned ] their land into desolation ] other [ ] and Jehu ru-] led over Is[rael and I laid] siege upon [ ]