CHAPTER ONE

The Bible—Which Bible?

ANCIENT CONTEXT

Brian Doak

The Books

Approaching the Bible is a difficult task, no matter who you are or how you do it. Where should we start? Perhaps the word "Bible" itself can get us into the game. Most directly, the title "Bible" comes from the Greek *ta biblia*, which means "the books." Indeed, the Bible as we now have it is a collection of books, a type of anthology of writings by dozens of different authors over a span of around 1,000 years. For Jews, "the Bible" would refer to a collection of thirty-nine books—at least in the way that Christians number the books—while for Christians, "the Bible" actually indicates a collection of at least sixty-six books, or, at most, around eighty to eighty-five books. We are already encountering a significant difficulty with our topic: Christians do not agree on the exact contents of "the Bible"! More on this later.

All Christians divide the Bible into two sections: the "Old Testament" or "Hebrew Bible" (we will use both terms interchangeably in this book) and the "New Testament." For Jews, the part that Christians call the "Old Testament" (Hebrew Bible) is not "old" or outdated at all, but rather represents the entirely of "the Bible." Separated as two "testaments" by Christians, the Old Testament occupies more than 75 percent of the volume of the Christian Bible, and the New Testament is about 25 percent. The Old Testament tells the story of the creation of the world and the creation of God's people as a nation; these people receive laws from their God and come to occupy a strip of land that we now call "Israel." Various kings rule over the people, but eventually the people suffer various disasters and get kicked out of their land. The people eventually return, however, and reestablish themselves (at this point, by the time they

return to their land, we can reasonably call these people "Jews"). In the New Testament, a figure named Jesus arrives on the scene, teaches and challenges his fellow Jews many things, performs miraculous deeds, and dies a brutal death. However, in one of the great plot twists in all of literature, Jesus rises from the dead and empowers his followers to carry on in his tradition. The Bible ends with a soaring apocalyptic vision, in which Jesus comes back to the earth, wreaks vengeance on all who rejected him, and sets up a heavenly paradise for the faithful. That is the basic narrative plot of the Christian Bible.

Which Books?

If someone claims to be a reader of the Bible, one question that would be fair to ask is: *Which Bible*? This is because Christians do not agree on the exact contents of the biblical canon. The word "canon"—from the Greek *kanon*, "measuring reed"—indicates a list of authoritative texts. For Jews and Christians, the canon of the Bible indicates those books that officially made their way into the Bible. For Catholic and Orthodox Christians (approximately 1.4 billion of the world's 2.2 billion Christians; see http://www.pewforum.org/), the Bible includes not only the sixty-six books that Protestant Christians (around 800 million people) accept, but also an additional set of books and expansions on chapters within the books that Protestants already accept. These books are referred to as the "Apocrypha" or "Deuterocanonical" works, and, if they were included in the statistics given above for the contents of the Christian Bible, they would occupy about 19 percent of the Bible's volume (just a bit more than the New Testament). Basically, Christians accept the same twenty-seven books of the New Testament as part of their canon (look at the Table of Contents of whatever Bible you have to see the list of these books). However, when it comes to the Old Testament / Hebrew Bible, things become more complicated. Consider the following chart:

JEWS	PROTESTANT CHRISTIANS	CATHOLIC AND ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS
***Torah* (Law):** Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy	**Pentateuch:** Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy	**Pentateuch:** Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy

***Nevi'im* (Prophets):** Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings; Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi)	**Histories**: Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther (the shorter version)	**Histories**: Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Tobit, Judith, Esther (the longer version), 1–2 Maccabees
***Kethuvim* (Writings):** Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Five Scrolls (Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther), Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles	**Poetical/Wisdom**: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon	**Poetical/Wisdom**: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach
	Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi	**Prophets**: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Baruch, Ezekiel, Daniel (with the Prayer of Azariah and Song of the Three, Susanna and the Elders, and Bel and the Dragon), Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi
		Some Orthodox and other groups also include: 1–2 Esdras, Prayer of Manasseh, Psalm 151, 3–4 Maccabees

Now, almost all Bibles that include these Apocryphal books do not simply integrate them into the Old Testament the way this chart implies (i.e., they are placed in a separate section in Catholic/Orthodox Bibles, and labeled as "Apocrypha" or "Deuterocanonical"), but we've arranged them this way to highlight the categories of material in question. Jews and Protestants share the same books for the Old Testament, but in a different order—at a certain point (the Jewish Hebrew Bible ends with Chronicles, while the Christian Old Testament ends with Malachi).

How was it that these Apocryphal books came to be in Catholic and Orthodox Bibles but not Protestant Bibles? This is a more complicated question than we can address here. In short, these books had more or less been considered part of the Bible for a long time, but during the Protestant revolution ("Reformation") in the sixteenth century, led by Martin Luther, these books came to be seen by some groups as not quite on the same level of holiness and value as the other books. Protestants have followed in Luther's tradition and do not consider these books "Bible," while Catholics and Orthodox simply continued to assert their value as "Bible" (though how these books function for Catholics and Orthodox vis-a-vis the Old and New Testaments is more complex than simply saying they are "equal" to the rest of the Bible). How would an individual reader of the Bible, then, decide which Bible to read? Such decisions are wrapped up in one's reading community. Almost no one comes to an abstract, "objective" decision on the canon; rather, we are *given* a Bible by a community.

How did any book come to be in the canon in the first place? Another difficult question. For the Old Testament, the embarrassing fact is that we simply cannot be certain how any of these books came to be collected into the Bible. There was no "canon conference" that we know about where official decisions were made. Probably, each book had to be helpful in some way for a sufficient amount of time for the communities that accepted them as the Bible. For some books, the notion that they were perceived to be written in the distant past, by heroes of the faith, made them worthy of inclusion. For the New Testament, we have more information—but not much more. Christianity seems to have thrived for many generations before a canon list of any kind had been formalized. We do not know with precision when Christian leaders first affirmed the New Testament books as official additions to the canon, but we do know that by the second half of the fourth century AD, basic agreement had been achieved. Early Christians—living after the entire Old Testament had been written and basically accepted as a canon by Jews—adopted the entire Old Testament as their own "Bible."

Some Christians even disagreed with this move; an individual named Marcion, a Christian leader living in the second century AD, saw such a huge difference in the presentation of God in the Old Testament and the New Testament that he thought the God of the Old Testament was in fact a different deity—not to be equated with Jesus, whom Christians hail as God in human form. To formalize this opinion, Marcion proposed a version of the Bible that cut out

the entire Old Testament. Other church leaders of the time, however, rejected this view, and affirmed the Jewish Scriptures (the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament) as part of their own canon. Thus, their rejection of Marcion had implications for affirming the Old Testament as canon.

However we think of canon, we must acknowledge that the canon is in fact diverse; readers may find themselves shocked at what was supposedly left out (that is, the idea of "lost" or "rejected" books of the Bible), but rather with what is included: a diverse range of narrative, poetry, law, songs of lament, prayers, arguments, and letters. Moreover, it is best for us to think of the cultural and religious process that produced the canon as truly a *process*, not an "event" that can be marked with a date. A canon implies a community, working through time to define the boundaries of their beliefs and norms through both inclusion and exclusion.

Which Words?

Not only do readers of the Bible have to contend with different canons, they must also contend with the fact that the Bible was *hand-copied* for a very long time (up until the invention of the printing press in the West around 1450 AD). During this process of copying, many additions, errors, and omissions crept into the text—so many, in fact, that there is no ancient manuscript of the Bible that is completely identical to any other manuscript. To be sure, many Christian groups that make formal doctrinal statements about the status of the Bible, such as calling the Bible "inerrant," "infallible," or "inspired," actually go so far as to say that the Bible achieves these states "in its original autograph." What does this mean, and why would anyone qualify inspiration in this way? An "autograph" refers to the original copy of a biblical book, that is, the one the author supposedly originally wrote. If errors of hand-copying arose after this original copy, we would want to be able to compare these later error-filled documents with the original.

However, there is a haunting problem with this idea: No original autograph copies of the Bible exist. And if we had one, how would we know? (We wouldn't.) At any rate, for many generations, scholars have taken up the task of sorting through what ancient manuscripts we do possess and finding out which words best represent what we think the original authors wrote. This process, called "textual criticism," is necessary for all ancient texts, even works like the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, to sort out the best readings.

What are these ancient manuscripts that scholars have to work with? The oldest Christian Bibles are from the fourth century AD: "Codex Sinaiticus" and "Codex Vaticanus." Both of these manuscripts are written in Greek, but both are incomplete, and both come hundreds of years after the writing of the New Testament (also written in Greek, probably in the first century AD). Some of the oldest parts of the New Testament that we have are from the second and third century AD, but these are not full books (just broken fragments). In Hebrew, the oldest copy of the Old

Testament we have is the so-called "Aleppo Codex," from the tenth century AD (note also the Leningrad Codex, a full version of the Hebrew Bible copied around the year 1009 AD). Readers may be struck by the lateness of these versions—if, for example, parts of the Old Testament were written hundreds of years before the New Testament, how can we know what happened during the (potentially) 2,000-year gap between the writing of parts of the Old Testament and the Aleppo Codex around the year 1000 AD?

One answer to this question comes in the form of the famous "Dead Sea Scrolls," a group of documents discovered between 1947–1956 in caves near the Dead Sea. Scholars soon discovered that these texts were copies of parts of the Bible (as well as other religious writings) produced by a sect of Judaism who lived out in the desert starting sometime in the mid-second century BC and remained there until around 70 AD. These scrolls took us back around 1,000 years earlier into the process of copying than what we had in the Aleppo or Leningrad Codices. Generally speaking, as it turns out, the texts of the Hebrew Bible that we have in the Dead Sea Scrolls are strikingly similar to the Leningrad and Aleppo Codices (where there is overlap)—suggesting that scribes had done a pretty good job of their copying through the years. This does not mean readers of the Bible have nothing to worry or think about, however.

One example must suffice. In 1 Samuel 10:26–11:1, the NIV 2011 reads as follows:

> Saul also went to his home in Gibeah, accompanied by valiant men whose hearts God had touched. But some scoundrels said, "How can this fellow save us?" They despised him and brought him no gifts. But Saul kept silent. Nahash the Ammonite went up and besieged Jabesh Gilead. And all the men of Jabesh said to him, "Make a treaty with us, and we will be subject to you."

However, in the Dead Sea Scrolls version of this same portion, the text reads as follows:

> Saul also went to his home in Gibeah, accompanied by valiant men whose hearts God had touched. But some scoundrels said, "How can this fellow save us?" They despised him and brought him no gifts. *Now Nahash king of the Ammonites oppressed the Gadites and Reubenites severely. He gouged out all their right eyes and struck terror and dread in Israel. Not a man remained among the Israelites beyond the Jordan whose right eye was not gouged out by Nahash king of the Ammonites, except that seven thousand men fled from the Ammonites and entered Jabesh Gilead. About a month later,* Nahash the Ammonite went up and besieged Jabesh Gilead. And all the men of Jabesh said to him, "Make a treaty with us, and we will be subject to you."

As you can see, the italicized portion seems to have been "added" to the Dead Sea Scrolls, and clarifies the situation of oppression in the narrative at this point. However, for a variety of reasons, scholars are now relatively certain that this portion was not "added"—rather, it was *original* to the text, and had accidentally dropped out in the process of copying. Most Bible translations now reflect this discovery, whereas the NIV 2011 relegates the longer text to a footnote.

Which Language?

As best as we can tell, the Bible was originally written in three languages. The bulk of the Old Testament is written in Hebrew (and even more specifically, the Hebrew that was written and spoken probably between the eighth–fifth centuries BC), although a few chapters and verses (mostly in Daniel and Ezra) were written in Aramaic, a language related to Hebrew. The entire New Testament seems to have been written in koine ("common") Greek. The first large-scale attempt to translate any part of the Bible was the so-called Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Old Testament first initiated in Egypt to accommodate Greek-speaking Jewish communities in the third or second century AD. Around this same time, or perhaps a bit later and on through the time of Jesus in the first century AD, documents called "Targums" appeared—these were Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Bible. By the late fourth century AD, the Christian church commissioned an updated, official Latin version of the Bible. This was called the Vulgate, and was the product of an early Christian scholar named Jerome.

The Vulgate was the official Bible of the church for a very long time, though others tried to translate the Bible into languages other than Latin at various points. For example, the Englishman John Wycliff did some translating of the Bible into English in the 1380s, and later, in the same country, William Tyndale translated large parts of the Bible in the early 1520s–1530s. Later, the Protestant Reformer Martin Luther translated the Bible into German in 1534, and eventually the Catholic Church produced its own English translation, the Douay-Rheims Bible (finished around 1610). The famous King James Bible came out in 1611 and became a standard of linguistic beauty in Bible translation.

Contemporary readers of the Bible in English have many choices for translations. Indeed, Bible translation and the production of various specialty Bibles have become a multibillion-dollar industry, and certain church traditions may come to prefer one particular translation as better than another. Since *all translation is an act of interpretation* (from any language, for any document), one is hard-pressed to say which translation is the "best" outside of long and very detailed discussions about how and why one chooses to interpret the Bible in a particular manner. Though we are using the New International Version (NIV) 2011 as a base translation in this book, we encourage readers to explore a variety of translations as they read the Bible. More

advanced readers may find it useful to conduct a bit of research on the translation philosophies beyond various contemporary translations, while beginning readers will probably find it simpler to choose one, read it, learn a bit, and explore from that point.

Chapters and Verses

Almost all modern Bibles are divided up on the page into larger divisions, chapters, and then smaller divisions within those chapters, "verses." These chapters and verses are not original to the Bible, and the ancient authors did not think in terms of chapter and verse divisions as they wrote. Rather, chapters and verses were added as part of Jewish and Christian reading traditions; in Christian Bibles, the first chapters divisions were made around the year 1227 AD, and verses came in 1551 AD. These chapter and verse divisions obviously made it a lot easier for people to refer to a specific portion of the Bible. Typically, when authors refer to a particular passage in the Bible, they use abbreviations and numbers like this: Gen 14:19–20 = the book of Genesis, chapter 14, and verses 19 through 20. In this book, we follow this system (if we want to refer to a single chapter in a book as a whole, we might write it out like this: Genesis 14 = Genesis chapter 14).

ONGOING COMMUNITY
Steve Sherwood

What Does It Mean to Say the Bible Is an "Authoritative Text"?

Let's imagine for a minute that you have to make a significant decision that will have a profound impact upon your life. Say you have to decide whether to have major surgery or not. One option you would have is to seek out a leading authority in the medical field, a specialist in your condition, ideally *the* leading authority. You ask her, "What should I do?" and you take her advice. Another option would be to consult a number of experts, experts in medicine and people who know you. You might do so independent of one another, but it might be great, if possible (which it is because this is happening in your imagination), to get this group together for a discussion, a conversation of sorts regarding your situation. There might be debate, disagreement, the conversation might ebb and flow, but in the end, the group emerges with its advice, "We've looked at this from a lot of different angles, and here's what we think you should do."

Which of these options would give you more confidence?

Or, a brilliant scientist may propose a new idea. The idea may capture the imagination, but it is not until that idea has been tried out in labs over and over by other scientists that the theory will come to be viewed as *authoritative*. The scientific community joins the originator of the idea in providing the idea with a position of *authority* (or, rejecting it if the idea does not hold up to the confirmation of the community).

Finally, if you were a prosecutor putting together a case for trial, it would be great to have one expert witness, but infinitely better if you could build your case around experts and witnesses all voicing support for the verdict you hope to see.

Jewish and Christian believers often speak of the Bible as their *authority* or describe it as *the* authoritative text for them and for their faith. But, if the Bible were composed over the span of hundreds and hundreds of years by dozens of people in a number of cultures, doesn't that undermine its *authority?* Wouldn't it be more convincingly authoritative if God just gave all the things God wanted in the Bible to one person, and said, "Here, write all this down"? Isn't this long, somewhat fluid process described in the "Ancient Context" section above too open-ended to give us confidence that God really might speak with *authority* in these words?

Let's return to the images we started with above. There *is* a sense where one all-powerful voice, one "genius," can inspire great confidence. One voice as the final word, *the* Leader. Nations that have followed totalitarian leaders (Hitler's Germany, for example) demonstrate the attractiveness of this idea. But, in virtually every realm of life, isn't wisdom best found through a number of voices coming together, discussing, arguing, and listening to one another? One brilliant scientist may impress with a stunning new idea, but the wisdom of that idea comes when the idea is worked out over time by others, applied, experimented with, verified.

What I am suggesting is that the fact that the Bible isn't one book, but is really more of a library, compiled over a long, long time by a large number of people is in fact, not only not a problem, but is one of the greatest qualities of this amazing book. The Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel (1976, 236) says,

> It may seem easy to play with the idea that the Bible is a book like many other books, or that the story of Sinai is a fairy tale…Consider what such denial implies. If Moses and Isaiah have failed to find out what the will of God is, who will? If God is not find in the Bible, where should we seek Him? …The question of the Bible is the question about the world. It is an ultimate question. If God has nothing to do with the prophets, then God has nothing to do with mankind.

What Heschel expresses negatively, "That if God couldn't have spoken to people like that, back then, then God can't speak to any of us, anywhere," I'd like to state positively. If God *could* and *did* speak to people, not just to one Spiritual Hero or Genius, but over and over again for hundreds of years, then God could still speak to people like us, here, now. That, if Jews and Christians are right and this book is a book that uniquely communicates about God to us, and this book came into being in such a long, roundabout fashion, then perhaps God still speaks to people as bewildered and confused as we often are.

Much of the *authority* that the Bible has comes from the way people have been shaped and changed by reading and interacting with it. We can see this *within* the story, as first Jews and later Christians interact with the parts of the text they already have, and we see it in the centuries that have followed. This is not to say that the people in the story of the Bible found *proof* of the truth of these words. But, again and again, people have come to these stories and words and recognized something there. A sense of, "Yes, I have felt what is being described in this story or passage! When I have experienced God, it has felt like these words describe." If the Bible only had authority in the sense of being an official museum piece, like the Magna Carta or Declaration of Independence, that would be a pretty weak authority indeed. When Jews or Christians speak of the Bible having "authority" for them, they are suggesting that in real ways the Bible describes God, the world, and themselves as they experience it today. They are not saying, "The Bible is authoritative because it just is," but rather that "the Bible has authority for us because we have experienced the world which it describes."

In this, and other ways, the Bible remains a *living* text, even though it is thousands of years old. Each time scholars and everyday Jews and Christians translate these words into their languages, contexts, and daily lives, the words live in new ways. The Bible is not a monument, etched in stone, that sits in some fixed place where tourists gaze upon it in its static, unchanging glory. It's not a museum piece; it's more like a beautiful musical instrument (a Stradivarius violin, for example), made by master craftsmen long ago, but whose beauty can only be discovered in each generation by being taken out and played.

While not negating the very human sense of the Bible being a living text described above, Christian communities typically mean much more than that when speaking of the Bible as living, or inspired. They typically mean that the Bible is somehow given life *by God*, or inspired *by God*. In this sense, the process I've been describing above, with comparisons to the ways in which the scientific community, over time, takes an isolated theory and begins to view it as accepted, authoritative belief or even fact is seen as the way in which communities of faith (first Jewish and then Christian) came to affirm that they believed God had somehow guided the authors of the various books of the Bible in unique ways. Christians have not always agreed upon what they mean by this; with meanings ranging from "Just as God gave Mozart musical genius, God gave the authors creative talents and they used them to write these words," to "God directly, perhaps even audibly in some cases, guided the authors to write these exact words," and positions in between these poles.

The Bible in a World Where God Acts

All of us bring to our experience and understanding of the world certain presuppositions or worldviews that undergird all that we think and perceive. Often, these views of the way the world works are so presumed by us that we are unaware that it would be possible to see the world in any other way. The authors of the Bible presumed a world where God not only existed, but acted in demonstrable and powerful ways in human experience. For some readers of this book, that is a shared worldview and we might not think twice about stories of miracles or God "speaking to" this individual or that one in the text. In this sense, the Bible has authority in that it describes actions of power done by God in the world. For others, perhaps coming to the text from more of a materialist view of reality ("I believe what I can test and verify"), this may seem anything but normal. I would like to take a moment here at the outset of the book to share a personal narrative that displays the way in which I can relate to both of these mindsets.

In the summer between third and fourth grade for me, my father got sick. It was right at the beginning of summer vacation, his as well as for my brother and me. He was a professor at a very small college outside of Philadelphia, and a student pursuing a master's degree in an altogether different field, and a husband and father to two boys. And one morning he got out of bed and the room was spinning, and he fell down and then threw up.

And then he got much worse. Within days he was hospitalized, unable to sit up, hold a pen steady enough to write his name, do anything. No one could figure out why this was happening. The doctors ran test after test, huddled and talked and probed possibilities like MS, a brain tumor, some mysterious and extreme virus…. He just got worse.

In July, a group of men from the church we attended came to see him at the hospital. This was not a miracle-believing kind of church. We believed in God, but when we prayed for sick people, we prayed that God would guide the doctor's hands, not that God would step in and act directly. We didn't believe God did that sort of thing today.

But, things had gotten so desperate for my father, and these men loved him so much that this is just exactly what they did. They gathered around his bed, all put their hands on him, and fervently prayed that God would heal him. And the next day, my dad sat up and didn't vomit. Within a couple days he could walk the few feet to the bathroom in his hospital room. A few weeks after that he came home and when classes started in the fall, he was there teaching as if, "I pretty much died" wasn't his answer to the question, "What did you do with your summer vacation?"

I can't say I've experienced more than one or two other events in my life that felt anything like that palpable of an experience of God. I've loved and prayed for a number of other people who were not miraculously rescued like my father.

I have had a handful of experiences that have felt to me something like the world in which God acts in our experience in clear and powerful ways, but large parts of my experience of life resonate with those that see natural or scientific explanations for events. At times my life has been faith in God that feels as much like a really strong hunch as absolute certainty.

I share this to suggest that, for me, coming to the Bible often feels somewhat similar. There are occasional moments of what feels like certainty, clarity, and power. A lot of other times, the Bible seems odd and mysterious, even confusing. Mystery and clarity. Certainty and confusion.

The people whose stories are narrated in the Bible display a similar range of experience when it comes to God. This is much of why I'm drawn to the Bible, as a scholar, Christian, and most significantly, a person. My hope is that, as you enter into this book, you will adopt a posture of openness to the people of the Bible and their experiences as told within it; experiences of certainty and confusion, power and the mundane.