



The Bible Is a Library

Picture this: One day the apostle Peter is taking a walk back home in Galilee some time after Jesus' resurrection. As he looks into the distance, he sees a rather large book floating down from the heavens escorted by a number of angels. Excited to know the meaning of this blessed event, Peter rushes forward, snatches up the divine volume, and sees *THE BIBLE* written across its cover. As he eagerly begins to flip through its pages—probably wondering how he is going to be remembered—a voice from the sky thunders forth: “Take this, read it, and make lots of copies.”

Seems silly, right? Yet for many of us this scenario pretty well captures our concept of what the Bible is. We often think of it as a collection of divine stenographic notes dictated by God to a few close human friends. The various books of the Bible are, therefore, a succession of chapters to be read much as one would read a novel. And as with any other book we are familiar with, we expect a pretty strict consistency from being to end. When this view is taken to an extreme, the Bible becomes a kind of magical good luck charm; what the Bible actually is becomes secondary to making sure nobody monkeys with it.

It's easy to understand how we can come to falsely perceive the Bible as a book. It certainly looks like one. Even the word "Bible"—derived from the Greek *biblios*—means book. For hundreds of years after the Protestant Reformation, Catholics were either implicitly or explicitly discouraged from personally reading the Bible by Church leaders concerned that some of the faithful would misinterpret the sacred truths and fall into heresy. Finally, the Bible is always referred to as the Word of God. So, why can't we approach the Bible as we would any work with a single author?

The Bible was written over time

The problem becomes apparent after even a superficial review of some of the books of the Bible. Consider the following two passages, for example. The first is taken from the book of Joshua and describes what happens at the conclusion of the Israelites' siege of the town of Jericho.

So the people shouted, and the trumpets were blown. As soon as the people heard the sound of the trumpets, they raised a great shout, and the wall fell down flat; so the people charged straight ahead into the city and captured it. Then they devoted to destruction by the edge of the sword all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys. (Jos 6:20–21)

The second is an excerpt from the Sermon on the Mount in the gospel of Matthew:

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. (Mt 5:43–45)

Clearly some significant development has gone on between the time of the ideas expressed in the first passage—a story that at least implicitly gives God's blessing to genocide—and the strict admonition by Jesus not even to hold a grudge against one's enemies. How could God's mind change so drastically from one chapter to another?

God doesn't change God's mind, but people do change their minds. The consistency among the various books of the Bible is mostly an illusion. (We'll consider the concept of biblical inspiration specifically in the next chapter.) The books of the Bible were in fact written over a great expanse of time and produced by cultures that had profound experiences of God but didn't necessarily understand the full implications and meaning of those experiences.

Other factors affect consistency as well. Even contemporaneous cultures—Egypt and Israel, for example—have distinct beliefs and customs. In any library we have to allow for a wide variety of types of books. Prose and poetry, fiction and non-fiction are the major divisions; myths and legends, historical chronicles, and dramas are some of the particular types we'll find. Some authors were blessed with greater ability, some with less. Some books were conceived of as part of a greater whole, others stand on their own or openly challenge earlier perspectives. (We'll explore these points further in upcoming chapters.)

Even the position of two books in the Bible can suggest a seamless connection that does not really exist. As is true of the books in any library, books in the biblical library have been placed together for reasons that may have nothing to do with their relationship to one another. In a public library, Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, the seminal work in the development of modern capitalism, could be just down the shelf from Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto*. In the biblical library, the satirical work about a fictional prophet named Jonah has been placed right before the writings of the real life prophet Micah. To think of the Bible as a library rather than simply as a book has enormous implications.

A variety of genre

Let's take a closer look at the variety of books in the biblical library beginning with the basic distinction between prose and poetry. Both abound in our library; sometimes we find them side-by-side in the same book. Chapter 4 of the book of Judges contains a prose version of the story of Deborah, a charismatic leader of the Hebrew people at a point of great crisis in their tribal history. Deborah persuades a

reluctant Hebrew general, Barak, to lead the army into battle against the Canaanite aggressors. (The Canaanites were the occupants of the Holy Land when the Hebrew tribes began their settlement in the 13th century B.C.) Deborah's exhortation under the inspiration of God pays off as Barak and the Hebrew army rout their enemy. Then the details of the battle are recounted again in chapter 5, this time in the form of a sung poetic tribute to Deborah.

Some books in the Bible are all poetry. The book of Psalms is a collection of the prayers of the Hebrew people that were originally sung to the accompaniment of musical instruments and dancing. (Some of the psalms still contain notes indicating their intended purpose and the instruments to be used!) A common device in Hebrew poetry found in abundance in the Psalms is parallelism—the same thought is repeated twice, with significant variations. Consider the following example: “My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God” (Ps 84:2).

The same sense of longing is conveyed using two distinct but equally vivid metaphors.

Close by the book of Psalms is the Song of Solomon, a brief work containing the most sensuous love poetry in the Bible. Here's a taste: “As a lily among brambles, so is my love among maidens. As an apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among young men” (Sg 2:2–3).

From myth to drama to suspense

To identify all of the types of prose literature within the biblical library would require a separate book. Just a brief sampling, however, should demonstrate what a creative library we possess. Chapters 1 to 11 of the book of Genesis introduce us to some of the greatest myths in world history. Knowing that Adam and Eve are not historical characters and that the Garden of Eden is not a geographical place takes nothing away from the story's grip on us. Once we come to see Adam and Eve as personifying an essential conflict within our human natures, the story's power intensifies. The questions raised and conflicts explored in this profound

reflection on the nature of free will and temptation are timeless.

We encounter some of the greatest legends in the Bible beginning in Genesis chapter 12 and continuing right through the early chapters of the book of Exodus. These stories centering around Abraham and Sarah, their descendents, and Moses differ significantly from the stories of Genesis 1–11. Myths are imaginative tales that explain a profound truth. Legends contain seeds of remembered historical events and charismatic leaders. The stories have been reworked so many times through oral tradition, however, that the tales have become personifications and illustrations of the values, self-understanding, and view of God within the communities that preserved them. More will be said about the book of Exodus in chapter 5 and of Genesis in chapter 8.

Dramatic literature is frequently found in the Bible. How can anyone not be moved by the ending of the book of Deuteronomy, for example? After all his struggles as God's appointed leader of the Hebrew people, Moses is allowed by God to see the Promised Land but dies before he and his people can enter into it (Dt 34). In the first book of Kings, you can feel the tension mounting as Elijah, the only prophet of Yahweh left standing, challenges 450 pagan prophets to a showdown on Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 18). The moments of confrontation between Jesus and those Pharisees who oppose him are some of the most memorable scenes in the New Testament. (See, for example, Mk 2:1–12.)

Many of the books of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) are labeled as "historical books" because they appear to give a historical account of the rise and fall of the kingdom of Israel. These books are more works of theology than of history, however, generally composed at a much later date than the time periods described. Even so, actual historical documents do sometimes seem to be faithfully preserved. The decree of Cyrus, King of Persia, permitting the exiled Israelites to return to their homeland in 538 B.C., is a good example of this (Ezra 1).

A brief glance at the New York Times' bestseller list will show that romance and suspense sell. In ancient times, the same was true. The book of Ruth is a wonderfully romantic tale. It tells of a young

Moabite widow whose unwavering loyalty to her widowed Jewish mother-in-law leads her right into a marriage made in heaven (literally, in this case, as it is part of God's plan). The story concludes with a "happily ever after" ending: Ruth and her husband Boaz, a wealthy landowner in Bethlehem, go on to enjoy the blessings of children and grandchildren. One of these grandchildren—David—would become the greatest king in Israel's history. (This simple story is packed with some profound implications; we'll explore them in chapter 6.)

For a sampling of biblical suspense writing, read the account of Paul's adventures in Damascus right after his conversion to Christianity. Chapter 9 of the Acts of the Apostles opens with Paul's overwhelming encounter with the risen Christ that causes him to abandon his plan to persecute the Damascus Christians, to change his name (formerly he is known as Saul), and to join the Christians instead. The story concludes with Paul's narrow escape from members of the local synagogue, who are out to kill him for betraying his Jewish heritage. He escapes the city under the cover of darkness in a basket lowered from an opening in the town wall, right in front of the guards posted to try and arrest him.

The range of our biblical library is so vast that we can even find some unexpected types of books within it. While the Bible may not contain works of science fiction in the technical sense, images such as Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones (Ez 37:1–14) or those visions given to the prophet John in the book of Revelation (see Rv 1, for example) bear a definite kinship to some of the science fiction and fantasy writing of our own time.

Even comedy and satire have their place. When the reluctant prophet Jonah hears God's call to head for pagan Nineveh, a city located northeast of the Promised Land, he immediately hops on a boat bound for a port in the land of Tarshish. This region, located somewhere along the coast of modern Spain, is at the opposite end of the known world from Nineveh! Through a series of misadventures—including a few days spent in the belly of a large fish—Jonah does finally make his way to Nineveh and preaches God's message of repentance. The people respond so zealously that even the farm

animals are required to be dressed in the customary sackcloth of the penitent. (Try to picture a sorrowful-looking cow without smiling.)

From all periods of history

This diversity in types of literature in the biblical library is matched by diversity in the historical periods when various books were written. Candidates for the title “last books of the Bible to be written” include the gospel of John, the book of Revelation, and the second letter of Peter, all probably written around the turn of the first century A.D. The story of Noah’s ark (Gn 6–9), on the other hand, has roots that go back at least to the second or third millennium B.C.

We know that the Noah’s ark myth has such an ancient pedigree because of archaeological discoveries in the lands between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Today much of this land, known in ancient times as Mesopotamia (“The land between the rivers” in Greek), is contained within the borders of Iraq. The roots of civilization run deep here; artifacts have been found in abundance dating back to the time of the Babylonians and even to the Sumerians, whose origins precede any written historical records. The Sumerians and the Babylonians in a sense invented history, as they became the first civilizations known to develop comprehensive writing systems. As scholars learned to decipher these systems, based on surviving clay writing tablets, they discovered the Epic of Gilgamesh, a saga that contains within it the story of a global flood sent by the gods and of the preservation of one heroic figure and his family. Somewhere along the way the ancient Hebrews refashioned elements of this ancient myth for their own purposes.

It is even possible that the roots of the Noah’s ark tale go deeper. A recent article in *National Geographic* magazine (May 2001) presents the results of geological, paleontological, and archaeological studies done hundreds of feet below the surface of the Black Sea that conclusively prove the sea was once a freshwater lake. About 7,500 years ago, rising sea levels at the end of the last Ice Age flooded through the valley separating the freshwater lake from the Mediterranean and raising the level of the Black Sea by hundreds of feet over a short period of time. Any human inhabitants living

along the coast of that lake would have had to rapidly evacuate their settlements as the water covered miles of previously dry land. Could this catastrophic flood be the origins of the myth? If so, we are looking at a library whose contents include stories created over nearly three-quarters of the history of human civilization!

Books within the biblical library can be dated to all of the significant periods in the history of Israel. Although the prose account of the escape of the Hebrew slaves was composed centuries after the events portrayed in Exodus 1–14, the poetic remembrance of the escape in chapter 15 has origins that are much closer to the thirteenth century B.C. context of the actual events. The legends of Abraham and Sarah and their descendents in Genesis reflect stories preserved by the individual tribes that came together to form the nation of Israel, stories that were crafted well before the Exodus events occurred.

The collection of stories contained in the book of Judges suggests an ebb and flow to the Hebrew settlement of the Promised Land that may well reflect the actual conditions of settlement during the two centuries following the Exodus. Many books of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) are packed with stories about or references to King David and his unification of the kingdom of Israel around 1000 B.C. While some of these books, such as 1 and 2 Chronicles, were likely written centuries after the kingdom period, there are sections of 2 Samuel which are probably taken from actual chronicles written about King David and the royal family during or shortly after David's reign. We'll look at portions of these accounts in chapter 7 of this book.

Certainly many of the psalms were composed for liturgical services at the Temple built by David's son Solomon. This first Temple period, as it is known, ended decisively with the destruction of the Temple and most of the rest of the city of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonian army in the 6th century B.C. The years preceding that catastrophe, as well as the approximately three generations during which thousands of Jews lived in exile in Babylon, were fruitful times for the creation of biblical literature. The people of a ruined nation attempted to reconcile the devastation they had

experienced with their belief in an all-powerful Yahweh who had pledged unconditional love and faithfulness to their ancestors.

Contained within the early prophecies of Jeremiah and in the early parts of the book of the prophet Isaiah are attempts to come up with some kind of an answer. Yahweh will chastise us for our lack of faithfulness to the covenant in order to re-form us into the people of God the Almighty is calling us to be. As the centuries go by after the Exile and Israel seems no closer to returning to the glory days of the kingdom under King David, books such as Job and Ecclesiastes are created to challenge this basic theological framework. These books, some of the most profound in the Bible, grapple with the “Big Questions”: How can a loving God stand by while so much misery is heaped upon his people? Can any human being truly find meaning in a universe full of chaos?

The latest books of the Hebrew Scriptures begin to reflect some of the ideas which have worked their way into Hebrew thought from the Greek world. The first mention of a soul comes in the book of Wisdom. The first biblical mention of a belief in the resurrection of the dead can be found in 2 Maccabees (chapter 7).

When we think of the Bible as a library and not as a book, we stop looking at the Bible as the spiritual equivalent of a formal family portrait. In such a staged photograph each member of the group strives to project a sense of perfect harmony and togetherness that rarely exists in real family situations. The various books in the biblical library are like the individual members of an extended family gathered together at a holiday dinner, a gathering replete with conflicting opinions and unresolved tensions as well as much good will and laughter. Individuals who are distinctly different from one another try their best to express their shared experience of family in ways that are often unique and even bizarre.

So it was with the various biblical writers who, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, created books that faithfully express their communal experience of a God whose unconditional love endures as the most profound of all mysteries.

Questions for Thought and Discussion

- 1) Create an imaginary library shelf on the topic of your choice. Pack the shelf with books representing as many different views and approaches to your topic as you can think of. (For example: a shelf of books about the Civil War could include: “The Gettysburg Address” by Abraham Lincoln; *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* by Frederick Douglass; *Co. Atch*, the journal of a Confederate soldier; *The Red Badge of Courage* by Stephen Crane.
- 2) After you have completed this first exercise, answer the following questions:
 - What are significant points of agreement and disagreement?
 - How have our understanding and interpretation of the event changed over time?
 - Which types of literature provide the greatest/least amount of insight? Why?
 - Which sources seem more objective? Any obvious biases?
- 3) Read 1 Samuel 8—12. What are the two points of view concerning Israel’s first king? Keeping the main points of this chapter in mind, suggest an explanation of how these two opposing points of view found themselves incorporated into the same text.
- 4) Read about Paul’s final journey in Acts 27—28. What are some elements of an epic or saga contained within it?
- 5) Compare the account of the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 with Paul’s report of the same events in Galatians 2. How does Galatians show the advantages of immediacy in recounting an event? What is the advantage of a work such as Acts, which was produced a significant amount of time after the events it describes?
- 6) Read the following three gospel accounts of the infamous fig tree (Mt 21:18–22; Mk 11:12–14; 20–24; Lk 13:6–9). What significant change in literary form does Luke make? How does the change alter the impact and point of the story?