

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH  
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SERMON: HOW WE GOT THE BOOKS OF THE BIBLE

TEXT: I JOHN 1:1-4

### SCRIPTURE

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us – we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

Question: When God is going somewhere, does God only drive on an Interstate Highway – straight and quick – or does God like to take the scenic route – meandering around before getting “there”?

Fair warning: if you believe that God always takes the straight, quick, direct route then you are going to have a very hard time with how we got our Bible.

Let’s start with the Old Testament, sometimes called the First Testament or the Hebrew Bible. I’m going to call it the Old Testament.

The Old Testament is really old. It encompasses stories from the beginning of time up through about 200 B.C. (Scholars refer to it now was B.C.E – before common era.) Many of those stories describe times in “pre-history” and were passed down orally.

Imagine that FCC was one of the 12 tribes of Israel. Maybe Benjamin. All of us apart of the tribe of Benjamin. In the centuries before the written word we had to have a way of preserving our history and faith for future generations. We did that by appointing sacred storytellers. The old storytellers made the new storytellers memorize all the family and sacred history of the tribe and then practice, practice, practice telling the stories. I imagine that every night after dinner the storyteller had an hour to tell the sacred stories. Maybe he or she took requests, “Please, please tell us the story of crossing the Red Sea. I love that story.” “No, no, I want to head about Noah and the Ark.”

Eventually the printed word came to Israel and slowly these stories began to be written down – not by one storyteller but by many acting independently. Sometime after that the individual stories began to be collected into what we would loosely call “books.”

I was fascinated to hear earlier this summer that a major university in Israel has a computer program designed to recognize differences in grammar, vocabulary, and such. They ran the Old Testament through the computer and it highlighted the parts of the Bible written by different hands. It agreed almost 95% with human scholars.

For example, did you know that the Book of Genesis has three distinct voices, scholars call them the “Deuteronomic,” “Priestly,” and “Old Epic” authors. There are two distinct accounts of creation that are written by two different authors. The editors of the Book of Genesis decided not to choose just one or to mesh them together but to simply print them both.

This type of collaboration and editing was involved in many if not all of the books of the Old Testament. But this leaves us not with a Testament but with only a bunch of independently circulating books about the sacred.

It was not until the people of Israel were in exile, cut off from the Temple and the priests, that they saw the need for “sacred books” which they could all respect. It was during the exile that they began to identify certain books as “sacred.” They started with what they considered to be the very most sacred. The five books which they collected they called “The Torah,” the first five books of the Old Testament. After the exile they began to expand the list of sacred books to include what we now call books of the prophets.

This process was accelerated during the time of the Maccabean revolt. The Seleucid ruler tried to substitute a new improved Torah that was more in line with the sacred scripture of the rest of the Seleucid Empire. Old copies were collected and burned. This was one of the major reasons for the Maccabean revolt. There are stories of Judas Maccabee collecting sacred scriptures to replace the ones burned.

In the late first century there was a school or religious movement at Jamnia/Yavneh that was dedicated to separating the sacred from the secular books. This was not an authoritarian group that imposed its decree – it was a long, slow process of convincing key leaders to get on board until there was some “tipping point” of opinion.

I'm told there was a lot of discussion about the Song of Solomon, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Esther – but they all made the cut. Others did not, such as, Tobit, Judith, The Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, Baruch, the Letter of Jeremiah, Bel and the Dragon, and the 151 Psalm, to name but some.

The criterion for inclusion in the Old Testament was:

1. Authority of authorship
  - a. Books listing authorship by Moses, David, or Solomon
2. Set out “broad outlines of Judiasm” in light of opposition by Samaritans, Sadducees, and apocalyptic groups
3. The weight of tradition – books that were long published and accepted.

The canon of the Old Testament was agreed on about a century before the time of Jesus but not legally fixed until the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 a.d.

One small note, the Jewish Bible and our Old Testament have the same materials but we divide them into more books, doing things like giving each of the minor prophets an individual book where the Jewish Bible lumps the 12 prophets together.

OK, enough of the Old Testament. I've got to get to the New Testament before all the hunger rumbles drown me out!

The books of the New Testament did not pop up immediately after Jesus' death because people thought Jesus was coming back to institute the end of time – ASAP! So why do all the work to write a book that no one would be left to read?

Paul was maybe the first one who began to consider a future without living witnesses to the resurrection. He started writing letters to various congregations offering encouragement and chastising theological errors. Then came the gospels, starting with Q. Q is the gospel we do not have but know existed because Matthew, Mark and Luke liberally quoted from it. We know this is so because of exact phrases being quoted. John was out of the loop but he got his gospel done before Matthew, Mark and Luke.

Lots of other books were written also. Some good, some bad, some sitting on the fence, like the Gospel of Thomas. Thomas told most of the same stories as the other gospels but always put an odd twist to them – sort of like how Rush Limbaugh would interpret reports of the President visiting an inner city school. You really don't need me to explain that, do you?

What happened was that each congregation ended up having a library of books. They made copies and shared with each other but pretty much every congregation had a different library. Naturally big churches had big libraries and little churches in out of the way areas may have only had a few books. If you were in Italy you had different sacred books than people in Egypt or Greece or Asia Minor. Geography had a lot to do with what you knew about Jesus!

The church leaders soon realized that Christianity was fractured and fracturing spiritually. There had to be a common, unifying core that defined what it was to be a Christian. They needed a canon – a slate of holy books that all churches would accept.

It was a good idea but it took literally several hundred years to pull it together. Lots of leaders proposed canons of New Testament books but getting agreement was more difficult than getting the debt ceiling raised in Washington.

About 300 A.D. things started simmering - pushed by Emperor Constantine's desire for religious conformity and his request for 50 copies of the canon to be used in the Roman Empire. Lucian of Antioch's Greek New Testament wasn't fully acceptable but it was something to build on. Then in 367 A.D. Athanasius, the Bishop of Alexandria in Egypt, who was called "The Black Dwarf" and who was forced into exile numerous times, adding up to 17 of the 45 years he served as Bishop proposed a New Testament Canon that was identical to what we have today.

Books were selected based on:

- Authorship – Paul's and Peter's and John's names were affixed to lots of books they did not write!
- Agreement with the Jesus portrayed in the Four Gospels.
- Books widely used by churches.

Left out were the Gospel of Thomas, Shepherd of Hermas, Clement, Psalms of Solomon, the Acts of Paul, the Apocalypse of Peter, among others.

This canon was not accepted until the Council of Carthage in 297 established once and for all (with a whole lot of arm twisting) the New Testament with the 27 books we now hold sacred.

But wait, it's not that simple! Oh no.

- The Catholic Church includes all the books of our Old and New Testament plus the books of the Apocrypha, all those books which I listed as not making the Old Testament canon.
- The Greek Orthodox Church have all the books in the Catholic Bible plus three more: I Esdras, 3 Macabees, and the Prayer of Manasseh.
- And the Slavic Orthodox Church includes all those plus 2 Esdras.

Well, so we don't all have exactly the same canon. Most all of the differences involve the apocryphal books that were not included in the Old Testament but happened before the time of Jesus. We all do agree on the New Testament Canon.

Well, mostly. If Martin Luther and John Calvin and a number of other leaders of the newly formed Protestant Church had gotten their way the Book of Revelation would not have been included in the Bible. Contrary to every televangelist or end-time preacher – they thought that the Book of Revelation was not worth reading and should never have been in the Bible. But they backed down.

On the other hand there have been others, like Thomas Jefferson, who created their own canon simply by removing all the parts of the Bible that he did not like. Jefferson didn't like any of the parts that talked about Jesus being divine or the Son of God. Hey, his canon of the New Testament was rather short compared to ours.

Today there are perhaps hundreds of different denominations but we are bound together by our New Testament and by our shared 39 books of the Old Testament. To us these are Words of Life – words that speak to what we hold as sacred.!

Remember the words of I John:

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us – we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

This is what our Bible does for us!

So, God took the scenic route with the Bible. No snapping a couple of fingers and the book appears. It was a long, messy job – sort of like when I make cheesecakes. The end result is heavenly but the kitchen looks like, well, just ask Phyllis.

The good news in this is that if God works through messy ways, like those used to create the Bible, then God can work through the messy ways of being and doing Church! And isn't that a relief!