

# BASIC CHRISTIANITY

## Lecture Number 6

### THE BOOKS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT AND HOW WE GOT THEM

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#### INTRODUCTION

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In this class we are going to look at the writings we know today as the *canon* of the Old Testament and reflect on how they came about and got included in that canon.

All the books of the Bible are theological; the first books of the Old Testament are historical as well. And the first of those historical books is called *Genesis*.

*Genesis* looks back to before the Fall/Rebellion and even before anything was. It presents the creation of *Adam* (Hebrew for “mankind”) as taking place in two stages: first, God *forms* Adam out of the dust of the earth, and then he *breathes* life into him.

And according to the account in *Genesis*, Man rebels against God and introduces disorder into his creation.

The result is a human society which is separated from God and from nature and from itself, divided within itself. Everyone born into that human society is alienated from God and nature and others and is divided within himself.

Human beings, as they are born, do not know what they are for, what their *end*, or purpose, is.

Fallen human society gives individual persons distorted moral values. The moral values of society are distorted because the people who make up that society are estranged from God and are confused about right and wrong. This is a vicious circle.

But God does not simply erase the first creation which “went wrong.” Instead, like a master artist, he redeems the “mistake” by making use of the result, weaving it into the fabric of his new creation. In this way even the rebellion becomes something precious through its consequences.

*Genesis* tells of God’s setting out through the slow and painful process of history to *form* a new mankind out of the remnant of the old, into which, in the fullness of time, he would *breathe* his life anew.

The rest of the *Old Testament* is the account of God’s dealing with man to form the nation of Israel to be the new Adam into which, at Pentecost, He will breathe his Holy Spirit (Hebrew *ruach* means “spirit”, as well as “wind” and “breath”).

#### BEFORE GENESIS

Let us begin by going back to the situation of the earliest man, to the time when he was no longer in harmony with God, but able to talk to himself, not only in his own head, but in some

kind of conversation with other human beings.

As we have seen every basic thing which is wrong today was wrong then. All of us come into this world estranged; Adam was estranged. He was on his own.

Adam [Man] had a memory of a time when he could live entirely off of what a lush, park-like Garden provided. <http://ldolphin.org/eden/> But he had no written record of what had happened.

When writing and reading was finally invented, only a tiny elite could use it. That did not change much until after the time of our Lord Jesus on earth.

What Man did have was memory and memorization; he had *oral tradition*.

His memory of the Garden may very well have been of one which existed in what is now the northern end of the Persian Gulf. The sea level was much lower during the last glacial period, which did not end until around 10,000 B.C. Emigrants from that lost paradise would have kept alive its memory. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_the\\_alphabet](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_alphabet)

The earliest form of writing was invented in southern Mesopotamia (Iraq) around 3,200 B.C., just opposite the place in the Persian Gulf where that lost island would have been. The rudimentary symbols were pressed into a moist clay tablet which was then dried and baked. It was not an alphabet. The first version was a set of arithmetic symbols which were used in bookkeeping.

But cuneiform tablets were big and heavy and brittle; they were clumsy to use, certainly not easily portable.

One of the first recorded human settlements was the city of Ur in that territory. Another was Babylon, and another was Uruk.

Some of the clay tablets found in Uruk tell of a great flood very similar to the one in *Genesis* and about a man much like Noah. They also give a list of eight patriarchs who lived long lives during the period leading up to the flood just the way *Genesis* does.

There are also in Babylon the remains of what is called a *ziggurat*, which was a large stepped or terraced temple tower much like the ones built by the Indians of central America.

The first eleven chapters of *Genesis* cover the story of the world from its creation down through the flood and the building of the "Tower of Babel." Then we come to the man Abraham.

**GO WEST YOUNG MAN!**

In the early 1800s the American west began first to be opened up by wagon trains of settlers from the east decades before the railroads made it easier and less dangerous.

In your imagination, pick out one of the hundreds of movies about those pioneers which you have seen. And then think about what those families were carrying in their covered wagons:

They had the family bible; they had any tin-type photos of family members they had; they had a

wash board; a rolling pin; and all the things they could carry which they would need when they got to the frontier. And they probably had a milk cow tied to the back of the wagon as well as a mule.

In other words, they did their best to bring their former life with them.

Well, about 4,000 years before that time, around 2,000 B. C., for some reason, a man named Terah, in the city of Ur near the Persian Gulf, decided to move his family way out west to the land of Canaan. This would require them to travel all the way up the Euphrates valley to Haran at the headwaters of the Euphrates River before turning southwest to the land of Canaan.

Among the members of his family in that caravan was his son, Abram, and Abram's wife Sarai.

They took with them as much of their former life as possible. That is they carried the culture of their former home with them *in their heads*.

As Abram was growing up he would have been immersed in the traditions about creation, the lost Garden, the patriarchs, the Flood, and the *ziggurat(s)*. He would also have been familiar with the local technology, i. e. how you did things.

In Ur there was also a *ziggurat* similar to the one in Babylon, though perhaps somewhat smaller. The building of one or the other may have lain behind the tradition of the Tower of Babel.

During that entire time, there is no reason to believe that any of them could write or read. But there is every reason to believe that they, like all ancient peoples, were very good at memorizing. So they had an oral tradition reaching all the way back to the lost Garden, but no written record.

The oral tradition was maintained by the tribe, the community. Each person would correct any random deviations by others from the standard version of the tradition. Everyone would want to keep it correct.

When they had gotten to Haran, Terah died, which left Abram as head of the family, the clan.

At that point, Abram received a call directly from God to pull up stakes, leave everything behind, and move on southwest to Canaan.

The remaining 39 chapters of *Genesis* tell about four generations: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob (whose name was changed to Israel), and Joseph.

## MOSES

The books of *Exodus*, *Leviticus*, *Numbers*, and *Deuteronomy* are all devoted to Moses. He arose about 400 years (i.e. several centuries) after the time of Joseph.

Moses could read and write. The first real alphabetic writing had been developed in Egypt. And Moses was raised as an Egyptian prince, although his nanny was his own Hebrew mother. So he got his education from the Egyptians and his knowledge of the Abrahamic Tradition from his mother.

Before the Exodus, he spent 40 years working for Jethro in the land of Midian. During that time when he was alone on the prairie, he might have begun writing down the Tradition and thinking about what it meant.

It was at the end of those forty years, at the burning bush, that God began talking to him. God revealed his own personal name to Moses, JHVH (I AM) and sent him back to rescue his kinsmen in Egypt.

Moses was probably too busy from then on to do much writing until after the Exodus when they had all gotten out of Egypt and gone on to the foot of Mt. Sinai.

So he returned to Egypt, organized the Hebrew people, and negotiated on their behalf with Pharaoh. Following the eating of the Passover Lamb, he led them out of Egypt on that awful night when “the angel of death” passed over the land.

After they had miraculously crossed over to the other side of the Sea of Reeds, Moses led them to Mt. Sinai where JHVH (the LORD) made a solemn covenant with the Hebrew people.

The Hebrews spent forty years at the oasis of Kadesh-barnea before God allowed them to enter the land of Canaan. Moses had those several decades in which to finish writing the original version of the *Pentateuch*, one of the names for the first five books of the Bible.

“When Moses had finished writing the words of this law in a book, to the very end, Moses commanded the Levites who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, ‘Take this book of the law, and put it by the side of the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, that it may be there for a witness against you.’” [Deuteronomy 31:24, 25]

This probably explains how Deuteronomy came to be found in the “House of the LORD” in @ 620 BC, during the reign of King Josiah. [I Chronicles 34:14-21]

At any rate, during that time God and Moses talked to each other. Thus Moses would have received divine inspiration in revising and extending the Abrahamic Tradition to convey saving theological truth which went beyond simply the memory, and guesses, about what had happened in the past.

Note:

Revelation does not just involve a message, or messages, from God. It also involves the preparation of those who are to receive it. The culture of Abram’s family prepared them with a context within which to receive, to make sense, of God’s revelation.

## JOSHUA

The book of *Joshua* tells about the invasion of the land of Canaan by the Hebrews (i.e. *Israel*) which began following the death of Moses. God directed Joshua, who had been second in command to Moses, to lead the conquest. Under his leadership they captured a number of the major cities of Canaan beginning with Jericho.

The original version of the book of Joshua, as well as the account of the death of Moses at the

end of *Deuteronomy* was presumably written by Joshua himself. At several spots in it there are references to Joshua himself writing. He may very well have been taught to write and read by Moses during the forty years at Kadesh-barnea.

The fact that the Pentateuch was written down did not mean that it was “published.” There was probably only one or two copies. Rather it became the standard and corrective for the memorized oral version.

## THE JUDGES

The book of *Judges* covers the time from the death of Joshua until the rise of Samuel, a period of two or three centuries. “In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes. [Judges 21:25]

The book covers the activity of twelve major or minor tribal heroes, “judges.” By the end of the period of the Judges, the entire land except for the Gaza strip had been brought under Israelite control. There were five cities in Gaza occupied by the Philistines: Gath, Gaza, Ashdod, Ekron, and Ashkelon. Later Jewish tradition gave Samuel credit for writing *Judges*.

## RUTH

The importance of the book of Ruth comes from the fact that she was one of the ancestors of King David. It is set in the time of the Judges, but actually it was written some time after 1010 B.C. However, the traditional author was Samuel even though he had already died by then.

## I SAMUEL

This book covers the rise of Samuel, the “last of the judges and the first of prophets.” He is the one whom God commanded to anoint Saul to be the first king of Israel, to pronounce God’s judgment on Saul, and then to anoint David as Saul’s successor.

## II SAMUEL

The reign of King David is the subject of II *Samuel*. The final editing of I and II Samuel was probably done by 925 B.C.

## I KINGS

I *Kings* begins around 970 B.C. with the last days of King David and the ruthless measures Solomon and his mother took to make sure he succeeded David. It covers the reign of Solomon and the disaster which occurred after his death. It also covers the building of the Temple in Jerusalem which took the place of the *Tabernacle*, the great tent where God met his people.

Solomon’s son Rehoboam, who succeeded him, provoked the ten northern tribes to secede. This resulted in two separate kingdoms: Judah in the south under Rehoboam and Israel in the north under Jeroboam. This will be the time when the great prophet Elijah arises.

I *Kings* ends with the death of Ahab, King of Israel and husband of the notorious Jezebel.

## II KINGS

II Kings begins around 850 B.C. with Elijah being taken up into heaven. It covers the conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians in 721 B.C., and it goes on to the conquest of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 and the Exile in Babylon.

As a result of the Assyrian conquest of the kingdom of Israel, the development of their canon came to a stop. So today, the tiny remnant known as Samaritans, recognizes only the Pentateuch. And it uses an obsolete form of Hebrew letters to write it.

## PROPHETS

During the period of I and II *Kings*, in both kingdoms there arose men, referred to as *prophets*, who spoke to the people in the name of God. Two of the most famous were Elijah and Elisha. Neither of them left any writings, although their ministries are described in I and II Kings.

Besides them, during the time of II Kings there were ten prophets who left writings: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, called the “major” prophets; and the “minor” prophets, Hosea, Amos, Habakkuk, Micah, Nahum, and Zephaniah. The distinction is based on the size of books.

Some portion or version of Job, Psalms, and Proverbs most likely existed before the time of the Babylonian Exile.

## THE EXILE

In 586 B.C. the Babylonians plundered and destroyed the city of Jerusalem, plundered and burned the Temple, and removed all the skilled and learned people to Babylon. Some of the people fled south to Egypt. Only some farmers and herdsmen were left behind in Judah.

This was a tremendous shock to the entire people. The nation had been warned especially by Jeremiah as well as the other prophets which I have mentioned.

So being convinced that God had brought this calamity upon them because they had not obeyed his Law, they set out to put repentance into practice. They put to good use the fifty years they would wind up spending in Exile.

In order to obey God’s Law they had to study it; and everybody had to study it. So they “invented” what came to be called the *synagogue*. Every Sabbath (Saturday) all the men were to gather in small groups for the purpose of systematic study of the writings which enshrined God’s Law.

And in order for this studying to be feasible every congregation had to have a copy of the collected writings. So their most learned men set out to collect, edit and standardize those writings, which could then be copied for all the congregations. The result was the beginning of what we now have as the canon of the Old Testament writings, the “scriptures.”

Synagogue worship consisted of standardized prayers, the singing of one or more traditional songs (psalms), the reading aloud of some passage from the scriptures, and a commentary by

one of the members of the congregation who was considered likely to have something of value to say. The commentary might be made by a visitor whose reputation preceded him.

A man who became especially learned in the scriptures, a “master,” from time to time would be consulted by individuals or groups. Every synagogue desired to have at least one such *rabbi* (Hebrew for “master”).

During their time in Exile, the book of the prophet *Obadiah* and the book of *Jonah* were produced.

## THE RETURN

In 536, fifty years later, the Persians conquered the Babylonians. And Cyrus, the Persian king, decreed that all Jews (Hebrews from Judah) who so desired could return to Judah. Furthermore, he encouraged them to rebuild the Temple and to resume the worship of the LORD.

By 520 B.C. no work had been done on the rebuilding of the Temple. Two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, encouraged Joshua, the priest, and Zerubbabel, the Jewish governor, to take over and get the job done. They were successful, and their books came to be included in the canon.

As a result in 515 a new and rather humble Temple was finished, and the sacrifices were resumed. Then Joshua and Zerubbabel led the people in the solemn renewal of their Covenant with the LORD.

But from then on there was a new factor in their national life: they have the institution of the synagogue to make sure that everyone learned what it was that God wanted of them.

The last two prophets whose writings came to be included in the canon are Malachi (@500-450 B.C.) and Joel (@400-350)

This seems to be the period when the books of I and II *Chronicles* and *Ezra* and *Nehemiah* were written. Chronicles is based largely on the books of *Samuel* and *Kings*. Ezra and Nehemiah describe the completion of the wall around the city in about 450 B.C.

## ALEXANDER THE GREAT

All of the books in the Hebrew canon were completed before the rise of Alexander the Great. He was the son of Philip king of Macedonia. By the time he was 26 years old he had conquered the entire Persian Empire and established the Greek language and culture throughout it.

When Greek was established as the language of learning in Egypt, the Jews living there wanted a translation of the canon into Greek. The traditional account was that seventy scholars were assigned the job. They produced what is now called the *Septuagint* (Greek for “seventy”).

The Septuagint came to include several other books written in Greek which are not in the Hebrew. These books are known as the *Apocrypha*.

At the time of our Lord Jesus, both the Hebrew version and the Septuagint, the Greek version, were accepted as Holy Scripture. And since Greek had become the universal language in the

entire Roman Empire, the Apostolic Church used the Greek Septuagint. The Eastern Orthodox to this day consider the Septuagint to be the canonical version.

Because the Christian Church was using the Septuagint, the Jews of the first century decided to no longer recognize it as canonical.

The Western Church, as Latin became the universal language in the fourth century, began using a translation by St. Jerome into the common, or “vulgar,” Latin of the time. This *vulgate* translation also included the apocryphal books.

The great translation into English, the King James version of 1601, also included the Apocrypha, but it grouped those books in a separate section.

Nevertheless, continental Protestants decided that only the Hebrew canon should be recognized. So English language Protestant bibles do not include the Apocrypha.

However, for Anglicans, the Apocrypha is still part of the Bible, and we read lessons from it at Mass as well as in the daily offices of Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer.

## CONCLUSION

On the one hand the Bible was written by men, but on the other hand it was written under God’s indirect and, at times, direct influence.

The same thing is also true about how the canon got established. God’s people as a community and under his influence made the decision. And their decision was based on such things as who wrote a particular book and what that book said. Some prophetic books got included even though what they predicted did not seem to have come to pass.

God’s people consider the Scriptures to be holy, because they were produced by, and witness to, God’s choice of them as well as to his love for them, not to mention his promises which the scriptures convey.

And, as Pope Benedict XVI said in an address to priests on the eve of his retirement:

That “these writings are Scripture is the result of the illumination of the Church that *found this canon of Scripture within herself*, (italics mine) she found, she did not make, but found. Only and ever in this communion of the living Church can one really understand, read the Scriptures as the Word of God, as the Word that guides us in life and in death.”

But the Scriptures of the Old Covenant do not give us all of the story; the best is yet to come!