



A History of the Bible

By John Barton

An opportunity to listen, reflect and discuss, led by Tom Kennar



Part One:

The General Landscape



A Best Seller

- 5 billion copies sold around the world
- Best seller during COVID (Is the virus predicted in the Book of Revelation?)
- A talisman/good luck charm (like a St Christopher): content matters less

How the Bible is used – by everyone

Generally – the bible can be used to support whatever view you are trying to put forward. It 'shape-shifts'

- Believers: inspired by God – high level of authority
- Non-believers: An omni-present 'trace' or 'ghost' at the edges of literary culture – source of quotations and allusions : e.g. 'David and Goliath struggle' or 'money is the root of all evil' or 'no peace for the wicked'

The Bible has not died out of popular culture. Even prominent atheists (like Dawkins and Pullman) recommend the teaching of foundational myths from the bible.



How we got the Bible

- The Bible is the product of a long and intriguing process.
- Few, *if any*, of the books are by one single author.
- Not one book – but a *collection*. ‘*Ta Biblia*’ – *the Books*.
- Books are arranged in different orders by different traditions.
- The ‘King James’ bible is not ‘the original’!
- Parts of the Old Testament go back 1000 years before Jesus.

Wrestling with the Bible

The Bible contains many elements which are problematic to both Jews and Christians. For example, God's destruction of innocent people during stories of conquest of the promised land.

The Bible contains many *genres* of literature: poetry, history, myths, song, prophecy, letters

“Very little of the bible tells you what to believe – it's more oblique than that”

- The Bible doesn't map directly on to Christian belief. There are some foundational ideas (like the Trinity) which are barely even hinted at in the Bible.

AND

- There are some absolutely central ideas in the Bible which don't feature in the Christian Creeds – e.g. the extensive moral teachings of Jesus.

Christianity and the Bible don't conflict with each other, but they are certainly not identical. (The same is true for the Jews' relationship with the Hebrew Bible).

Inspiration

Some Protestants claim that their whole faith derives entirely from the Bible – but in reality, this isn't really the case.

Catholics (like Jews) don't make this claim. They believe, instead, that tradition, supplements the Bible. (Anglicans add 'reason' and Methodists add 'experience' as other important tools in understanding the Bible).

The extent to which the teachings of the Old Testament can be held alongside the new thinking of Jesus, Paul and the other New Testament writers is a major issue for Christian thinkers.

“God-breathed” or “God Inspired” (2 Tim 3.16) – much is made of this by some Christians, to the extent of believing that God is the *author* of the Bible.

To say that God has inspired an author is another thing altogether. It means that God had a hand in the production – but exactly how that happened is seldom defined.

Very rarely does the Bible claim that God is the author. Yes, prophets sometimes declare 'Thus says the Lord' – but many books are clearly and obviously human reflections *about* God. (The Psalms, for example, are storehouses of prayers and praises directed *towards* God, rather than coming *from* God).

Origins and Interpretations

This course will explore many of the ways in which the Bible came together. For now, let's focus on the reality that many people today have a tendency to take short passages or even a few words out of context – usually to support their own religious or world view. They are used like 'oracles' which can be applied to today's circumstances. Recent examples include:

- Abortion
- Same-sex relationships
- Climate Change

But when we investigate the Bible, we are seeking to understand it within the parameters and context of its own time. This doesn't mean the Bible has nothing to say about *our* time. (No-one would say such a thing about Greek tragedies or Shakespeare). But it does mean that our experience of the Bible is *enriched* by getting to know something about the context of the original writers of the text.

Example: the letters of St Paul dealt with important issues in the church of his day. But we must distinguish between the world as it was at the time of St Paul, and the one that we inhabit today.



Remote Culture

The Bible comes at us from several remote cultures (of a *long* time ago). These were cultures in which religious questions were *central* to community life, in a way that they hardly are today. But we can empathise with the questions they were asking – about the meaning and purpose of life, and about how we should live.

Translations

Old Testament – originally in Hebrew and some Aramaic.

New Testament – originally Greek (and some Aramaic).

Earliest translation of the Old Testament was in around the 3rd Century before Jesus – from Hebrew into Greek. (And this was the main source for the translators of the King James).

And we all know that much can get lost in translation!



“The Lord was with Joseph, and he was a lucky fellow” (from a pre-King James translation of the Bible into English by John Wycliffe.)

The modern English speaker is spoilt for choice. John Barton recommends obtaining two bibles:

- One should be a direct *translation* like the King James or its successor the NRSV
- Another should be a *trans-literation** like the New English Bible or the Message

(Note: We now know a lot more about the ancient texts than did the translators of the King James. 400 years of scholarship has increased our understanding of the nuance of words and how they were used.)

In conclusion

John Barton hopes that we will get a sense of how endlessly fascinating and intriguing the Bible is, whether or not we accept its religious claims.

* A *trans-literation* conveys the meaning of the text, but not ‘word for word’.