

A History of the Bible

By John Barton

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

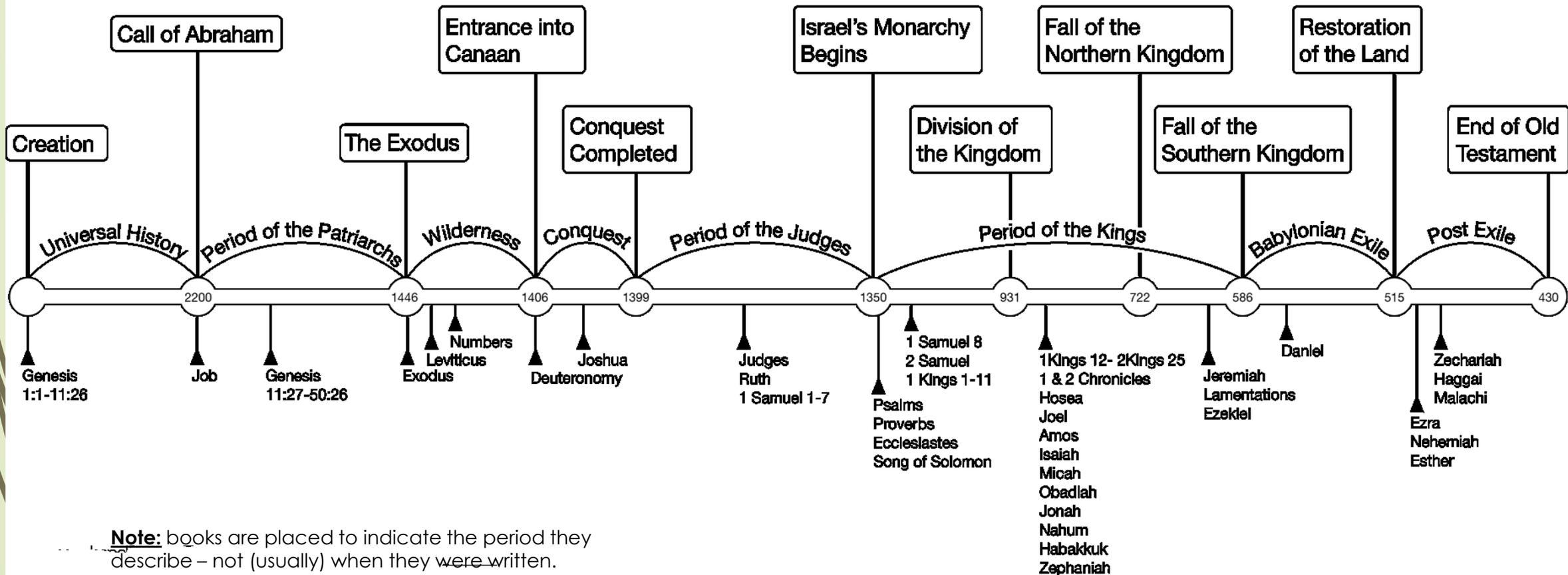
Part Three: 'In the beginning'

Recap of Main Points so far...

- 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 / Library*.
- 'For the people of New Testament times, there was no 'New Testament'. (It was a long time before Paul's own letters, and the Gospels, came to be regarded as part of 'The Bible'.)
- The Gospels, with all their differences and difficulties, offer us a compelling picture of a consistent person, whose character explains why people felt not only challenged, but accepted and affirmed by him.
- **Today:** what about 'The Scriptures' on which Jesus and the first Christians based their faith...?

Some basic background – dates.

OLD TESTAMENT TIMELINE



Note: books are placed to indicate the period they describe – not (usually) when they were written.



Part Three:

In the beginning...



It's all too easy to forget that the first Christians were Jews.

There were other Jewish sects around at the time, like the Pharisees, Saducees and the 'Essenes' (who produced the Dead Sea Scrolls). The 'Christians' (or 'Followers of the Way' as they called themselves) were just the most successful (in the long term).

What united all these sects was a reverence for what they called 'The Books' (the Hebrew Bible).



The Old Testament did not come into being over a single century (like the New Testament). Some sections (like poems and songs) may come from as long ago as the 10th Century BC – that's 3,000 years ago!

Most of it started to be written around the 8th Century BC – the time of the Homer in Greece, and 'the Great Prophets' in Israel and Judah. Large parts of the first five books of the Bible come from around this time, or even a little later (scholars suggest around 500 BC)

The major watershed was the so-called 'Exile' (570 BC) – when the leaders of Judah were carried off into captivity in Babylon. It's around that time, under persecution and suffering, that the writers of the Hebrew Bible really got to work – framing a narrative of God's providence for the people of Israel.

Stories of that time include Genesis – drawn from Babylonian myths.



Origen (3rd Century AD, senior Christian leader & theologian*):

“Could anyone be so unintelligent as to think that God made a paradise, somewhere in the East, and planted it with trees like a farmer? No-one, I think will question that these are only fictions, stories of things that never actually happened, and that figuratively they refer to certain mysteries.”

John Barton’s own impression is that the story of Creation was meant literally – it just happens not to be accurate. Since no-one at that time could possibly have known how the Universe came to be.

Much of the ‘history’ laid out in the Bible is contentious, and no body of scholars would say that it is all completely accurate. But there is enough actual history which fits with other Middle Eastern stories. Many names of Kings and Rulers are shared with other cultures’ histories.

* Origen was one of the most influential figures in early Christian theology, apologetics, and asceticism. He has been described as "the greatest genius the early church ever produced". See [this link](#) for more information



As well as 'history' (which include history of what prophets said), the Hebrew Bible contains two other kinds of literature:

- 1) POETRY – seen above all in the Psalms. Used in the temple.
- 2) 'SAYINGS AND WISDOM LITERATURE' (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Ecclesiasticus)

All of it comes down to us through the work of scribes – often under the control or influence) of dynastic Kings. We do well to take account of political motivations behind some of the writing....

Example: the 10 Commandments.

Given to the people in the desert – and yet they appear to us as rules for a settled population, with houses, farms and neighbours. The Commandments have been projected back into the time of Moses, to lend them greater authority.

Similarly – Psalm writing is projected back to the time of King David, and Wisdom literature projected back onto Solomon.



A note on 'The Apocrypha' – later books (written much nearer to the time of Jesus). (Also known as 'deuterocanonical' books – meaning 'second canon'*)

They include the Books of the Maccabees (a time of rebellion), and lovely stories from the time of the Exile, like 'Bel and the Dragon' and 'Tobit'.

Early Christians seem to have regarded them as 'Scripture' – but Jewish councils (and Protestant councils) ultimately rejected them as such.

(You can still opt to buy Bibles with, or without, 'the Apocrypha' – the Roman Church still reveres them as 'deuterocanonical'.)

Tip: Treat yourself to a reading of Bel and the Dragon – very Wizard of Oz!

* And 'canon' means 'authorised' – from Gk word for 'rule' or 'measuring stick'

A general timeline emerges:

1000 BC – Some very ancient texts, e.g. Song of Deborah, book of Job, perhaps some collections (now lost to us) or oral histories of the stories of Moses and the Patriarchs

Sixth Century BC – a period of compiling and collecting the bulk of the sacred writings, under authority of the Kings

Third and Second Century BC - Apocryphal writings (Maccabees, Tobit, Bel etc...)

First Century BC (100 years before Jesus), all the books we now regard as The Old Testament – and most of the Apocrypha - had been generally accepted as canonical 'Scripture'.

Daniel was the last to be written – the later section being written in Aramaic, which was emerging as the common tongue at the time of Jesus.

HOW DID THIS COLLECTION OF BOOKS COME TO BE REGARDED AS THE BIBLE?

Answer: Gradually! By public and mutual acceptance.

“FLUIDITY”

There is a great deal of difference between the ways that the Jewish and Christian traditions handle (and use) the books of the Hebrew Bible.

For Jews:

- the Torah (first five books) is paramount and Sacred.
- The other books are called ‘The Writings’ and treated less reverentially.
- The Apocrypha is ignored by modern Jews altogether.

Early Christians did not have the same access to the Hebrew Bible that we do. (Hand-written scrolls are expensive and rare.) Genesis, Deuteronomy, Isaiah and the Psalms seem to have been the main sources available to 1st Century Christian writers.

The Holy Bible – as we know it today – was still to arrive.

Next Week: Who’s in and who’s out?!