



A History of the Bible

By John Barton

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

Part Five: Conclusion: Nine Lessons and Carols

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.



The Hebrew Bible (Week Three):

- Started to be written down from around the 8th century BC.
- We don't know how much material was drawn from earlier, written or oral sources (none exists now).
- The Hebrew Bible contains HISTORY (including laws), POETRY and SAYINGS (wisdom)
- The Apocrypha contains books which never made it into the Jewish Canon, but which are considered authoritative by many branches of the Christian church (e.g. Bel and the Dragon, 1, 2 & 3 Maccabees, Ecclesiasticus)
- Barton emphasises the 'fluidity' of the process of arriving at the Bible we have today (noting that different churches today still have different arrangements of books in their Bibles).



In week four – we considered the New Testament, asking ‘who’s in and who’s out.

First, we paused to think about the different approaches that Bible readers and scholars bring to the task of biblical studies. We identified three primary approaches:

- a) ‘Historical critical’ approach**
- b) ‘Confessional’ approach**
- c) ‘Final Form’ approach**

Next, we debunked the *myth* (pedaled by Dan Brown) that the creation of the New Testament (from a wide variety of supposedly equal sources) was a deliberate act of either misogyny or patriarchy.

Rather, we saw that the primary New Testament books had always been treated as authoritative by the earliest Christian writers. (These include the four gospels, most of the letters of Paul, and the Acts of the Apostles).



Finally, we explored some of the apocryphal New Testament writings, with particular reference to:

- **The Gospel of Jude**
- **The Gospel of Thomas**
- **The Proto-Gospel of James** – which we discovered holds much of the story-making materials which are enacted in Nativity plays today.

We noted that the final ‘canon’ was not completely settled until the church councils of the 4th century – although there was a great deal of consensus prior to that date.

We heard Barton’s conclusion that *“although we now think of the New Testament as a fixed, immoveable object, on closer inspection we find that there is some ‘fuzziness’ around it’s illustrious edges.”*



Part Five: Conclusion

Nine Lessons and Carols





Nine Lessons and Carols:

- 1) Old Testament passages which are believed to foretell the coming of Jesus
- 2) Excerpts from the Gospel accounts of Jesus' birth.

The service begins with a 'bidding' which amounts to an interpretation of the whole of the Bible in one sentence:

"Let us read and mark in Holy Scripture the tale of the loving purposes of God from the first days of our disobedience until the glorious redemption wrought us by this holy child."

The Bible is seen through this lens as a story of paradise lost, and paradise regained.



Main Characters in the story:

Adam – who sinned by disobedience in the Garden of Eden

Jesus – ‘the last Adam’ (according to St Paul) who, through his obedience, conferred salvation on humanity.

The Bible is therefore presented as a narrative of a disaster (the Fall), followed by a rescue mission (the Atonement). This is the simply obvious way to interpret the Bible’s ‘meta-narrative’ – to most Western Christians.

By this interpretation (way of reading) the Old Testament is a history of Man’s fall (which Adam landed us in), then mankind’s continuing degradation and sin, ending with prophecies of a coming Saviour (Jesus Christ’.

“Unto us a son is born – authority rests upon his shoulders. He is named wonderful counsellor, mighty God, everlasting Father, the prince of peace.”



This is a very *Christo-centric* reading of the Bible. Mainstream Jewish reading of broadly the same Scriptures can come as quite a shock...

For Jews, generally-speaking, the Bible is not a tale of **disaster and rescue**; it is much more a story of **providential guidance**.

Adam features very little in Jewish thought. **Abraham** is much more central in their thinking: the founder of the people of Israel, to whom God gives a land for them to live in. They are expelled from the Land when they sin, but then allowed back and given an ongoing existence.

No emphasis on salvation – in the ‘other-worldly’ sense that Christians emphasise. Rather, ‘salvation’ applies to the whole nation of Israel, guided through history by their God. The Jews arrange the Old Testament differently – to underscore *their* understanding of its meaning.

For Jews, the Bible is not about ‘Fall’ and ‘Redemption’ – but about how to live a faithful life in the ongoing ups and downs of human history.



So, whereas for Jews the Old Testament is a source of instruction about how to live today, Christians have a tendency to mine the Scriptures for verses which prophecy the coming of Jesus as Messiah, or to support other theological dogmas...

Three famous examples of 'bible-mining' by Christians:

1) 'Suffering Servant' – *"But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed."* (Isaiah 53:5). For Christians, this (and other similar passages in Isaiah) point to Jesus. For Jews, the 'suffering servant' is a metaphor for the faithful people of Israel, whose collective suffering will bring healing to the world (e.g. through the Holocausts of history).

2) “A virgin shall conceive...” Isaiah 7...(redacted for clarity)

Now in the days that Ahaz...was king of Judah, Rezin king of Aram marched up to wage war against Jerusalem. He was accompanied by Pekah son of Remaliah the king of Israel... Then the LORD said to Isaiah, “Go...to meet Ahaz ...and say to him: Calm down and be quiet. Do not be afraid or disheartened... For Aram, along with...the son of Remaliah, has plotted your ruin...But this is what the Lord GOD says: ‘It will not arise; it will not happen...’

Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, “Ask for a sign from the LORD your God...

But Ahaz replied, “I will not ask; I will not test the LORD.” Then Isaiah said...‘Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: **Behold, the young woman will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call Him Immanuel...** Before the boy knows enough to reject evil and choose good, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste.

Matthew appropriates one line from this entire historical tale, to prophecy the coming of the Messiah: “**All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Behold, the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call Him Immanuel” (which means, “God with us”).**

Matthew 1.22-23

Note also Matthew’s incorrect translation of the word ‘virgin’ – taken from a Latin translation of the original Hebrew, as was available to him at the time.



3) 'The sin of Sodom' – Many Christians have often read Genesis 19 as a treatise against homosexuality (i.e. by calling it 'sodomy' for centuries). Whereas many Jews and other Christian interpreters read it as a treatise against gang-rape, general immorality and specifically the selfish sin of not granting hospitality to strangers.

Jesus himself seemed to favour this interpretation, when he told his disciples that towns who fail to **offer hospitality** to them will have a worse time than even Sodom and Gomorrah:

Matthew 10: 14-15: *And if anyone will not welcome you or heed your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.*



SO: Jews and Christians therefore share the Old Testament in common, but they read them in such *different* ways, that it's almost as if they were completely different books.

"For Christians, the Old Testament is about God, humanity and salvation. For Jews, the Bible is about God, people and land." (Quote from a Jewish historian)

"The Bible is a vast and baggy work, and can sustain many different approaches to its central meanings" (Barton).

But is valuable for Christians and Jews to understand the differences in the ways they read the same set of Scriptures. Both Christianity and Judaism have changed beyond almost all recognition from where they were in the 1st Century AD. Nevertheless:

- a) Judaism was and remains a religion of hope (though not of heaven, rather of earthly peace).
- b) Christians continue to believe that obedience to God's teaching is important (though the 'Jesus-event' offers latitude over some Old Testament laws).



Barton argues that both religions should be careful of claiming that *their* reading of the Scriptures is the only correct one.

Rather, we should be aware of the *differences* and learn from them.

For difference can be fascinating – and we should *learn* from it, not try to eliminate it.

Reading the Scriptures intelligently, and with an understanding of the importance of diversity of opinion, is a fascinating task. For example, there are some Christians who claim that the 'New Testament Church' was homogenous and unified. But actually, the earliest Christian writings tell us that even in the earliest years of Christianity, there was already a divergence of views on many subjects.

One thing we can learn is that Judaism and Christianity have **always been internally diverse** – as well as differing from each other (i.e. both are divided into many different 'sects' who read the Scriptures in unique ways). Denominations are nothing new!

Biblical study should be a source of fruitful dialogue, or even argument. The aim is not to winning a race, but mutual illumination.



Some concluding thoughts from Barton:

“Recognising the diversity of readings of the Bible helps us to recognise the diversity within ourselves. It discourages us from building the walls which separate us from each other.”

“The Bible is not a monolith – and nor are the faiths it resources and informs. As we cross the threshold into a new and uncertain decade, let us take heart from this most ancient and illuminating of books.”

Some questions for us:

- 1) Can you think of examples of how a less ‘dogmatic’ and ‘certain’ reading of the Bible could be helpful to building the Church of God?
- 2) How different would the Church of today be if we focused less on the narrative of ‘Fall and Rescue’ and more on the (Jewish) narrative of ‘Instruction for living life today’? (e.g. The difference between ‘receiving communion’ and ‘washing of each other’s feet’ – i.e. the different narratives of the Last Supper, as expressed by the Synoptic Gospels and by John’s Gospel)