



# **HOW THE BIBLE HAPPENED**

**a primer for persons who want to understand**

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## HOW THE BIBLE HAPPENED: I

The Bible is not a book. Oh yes, most people have been taught to believe that it is a book, a holy book that appeared at one point in time very much as the *Qur'an*. But that is not so. No, the Bible is a gathering of "books," some so short as to occupy a single page of print, and the process of gathering covered a period of several hundred years. In fact, a few of the longer books, such as the Book of Psalms, were themselves compilations that were done over a period of two or three hundred years.

For Christians the Bible divides into two parts: The Writings of the Old Covenant, usually shortened to "The Old Testament," and The Writings of the New Covenant, known as "The New Testament." The Old Testament, originally composed in Hebrew and a bit of Aramaic, is about four times the length of the New, which was composed in Greek.

Jewish people rarely refer to their part of it as "The Bible." They consider it to be three different gatherings which they know as "The Torah," "The Prophets" and "The Writings." In the Hebrew language that is *Torah*, *Nevee-im* and *Kethuvim* and they abbreviate that with the abridged title, *TaNak*.

As for Christians, they traditionally divide their collection into "Gospels" and "Epistles," especially for public readings in worship.

The portion known as The Torah was assembled as a discrete collection in the early phase of the rule of the Persians, in the fifth century B.C.E. The person considered to be most responsible for that was a man named Ezra, commonly known as Ezra "the Scribe" even though his Hebrew title, *sofer*, is a word better translated as "tradition expert."

He was far more than a copyist. Indeed, he seems to have assembled some materials already committed to writing before his time while committing much oral tradition to writing for the first time and adding necessary explanations to that.

In the biblical Book of Nehemiah, in chapter eight, we find an account of the first public reading of The Torah in the partially rebuilt city of Jerusalem, an event that is the prototype for the weekly Shabbat readings of Torah in synagogues today. As you read it, allow yourself to imagine the scene and every detail in it. The importance of the occasion warrants the listing of the names of those who attended Ezra as assistants on that day.

READ NEHEMIAH, CHAPTER 8, PREFERABLY FROM THE JEWISH PUBLICATION SOCIETY'S TRANSLATION OF *TaNak*.

The reading and the beginning of the study of that great document were followed, as you notice, by the celebration of the fruit harvest season known as *Sukkot* which, in turn, came to follow the sequence of *Rosh Hashanah* ("head of the year"), the Ten Days of Awe and *Yom Kippur* ("Day of Atonement") as the prelude to the annual re-rolling

of the great Torah scrolls in order to begin the new annual reading of it on a Sabbath by Sabbath pattern.

At least one part of the completed Torah had been written as a single scroll earlier in time. We find reference to that in the 22nd chapter of the Second Book of Kings.

#### READ II KINGS 22, AGAIN IN THE JPS EDITION

It is called the Torah of Moses in that account, though in later Septuagintal and Christian tradition it would be called Deuteronomy. Ezra merely incorporated it into his larger collection--though likely with a few revisions and additions. Other segments of the final Torah were quite likely written long before the time of Ezra as well. Surely the well-known story of Joseph was a written account, perhaps from the time of King Solomon. It is found in Genesis 37-50.

As Ezra and his fellow scholars assembled the ancient oral traditions-- though they may well have had predecessors working at the task-- they found at least two and likely several strands of preservation. When we study parallel accounts of many stories and legal codes we find one large set that used the named *Elohim* (the plural of *Eloah*) for the single deity of their tradition while another set named it as *Yahweh*, a verbal name that means "he makes happen." (It is the *hif'il*, the causative form of the verbal root that designates "becoming" or "coming into existence.") The task of those scholars was to sort through all the materials they knew in order to assemble them into a comprehensible pattern and sequence.

The first "book" to emerge out of that process was an account of ethnic and genealogical materials that they titled *beRe'shth*- "In Beginning" from its opening word in the Hebrew text. (The Septuagint translation of later time would give it the Greek title, "Genesis," by which Christians would come to know it.) The beginning of its continued story of ethnic roots is at chapter 12 where we read that a single patriarch named *Avram*-- "Abraham" for Christians and "Ibrahim" for Muslims, which means "Big Daddy."

As a prelude to the story, the first eleven chapters of the book provide us with accounts of creation and the larger world of the ancient Middle East as it centered in Babylon. The opening chapter is a quasi-poetic account of the creation of the world as the product of the spoken desires of *Elohim*. "Let there be..." is the beginning of the creative pronouncements. Now the idea of primeval creation as the result of words spoken by a single god originated in Egypt, and it is interesting that there are eight such pronouncements to match the eight basic principles called into being by Egypt's Amun! We find these eight pronouncements in 1:3, 1:6, 1:9, 1:14, 1:20, 1:24, 1:26 and 1:29. As the liturgy was composed, however, these are telescoped into six "days" of creation with the creation of Sabbath following it to match the Babylonian scheme of the seven-day week, an ingenious construction. Ezra's people had once come out of Egypt, but now they were reconstituting themselves in Babylon.

As the history of this people is laid out in the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings, we clearly see that it divides into three eras. The first is the time before King David when they were a set of tribes linked together by a common group of ancestors, a common code of conduct (attributed to Moses) and a common language. At about 1000 B.C.E.\* they became a nation under the charismatic leadership of that king and the organizational skills of his son, Solomon. At the death of Solomon the kingdom split; the northern territories broke away from the south and became the Kingdom of Israel while the people loyal to the dynasty of David went on as a kingdom named Judah.

*\*A note about dates:*

*Dates are listed using C.E. for "Common Era," (synonymous with the Roman abbreviation "A.D.," anno domini, "year of our lord"—"lord" being the emperor) and B.C.E (meaning, simply, "Before the Common Era").*

After two hundred years of survival as a nation, Israel fell prey to the all-devouring Assyrians and ceased to be a nation in 721 B.C.E. Judah continued, preserving the dynasty of David, and was finally done in by the Babylonians in 587 B.C.E. when most of the people of Jerusalem were deported to the city of Babylon by their conquerors. That was the end of their political existence. They were no longer a nation. But they did survive as a people with their own ethnic identity, some of them in Babylon but many others as refugees in Egypt and elsewhere, or as rural survivors in their ancestral land.

It was out of Babylon that they emerged in a form that could preserve their identity: as an ethnic religion. And the formation of the Torah was one of the building blocks of that reconstitution.

The opening chapter of Genesis combines two aspects of their historical origins— as a people who once came out of Egypt, and now as a people whose leaders were located in Babylon.

In chapters 2-4 of that book we find a wonderfully folksy story about the origins of "Adam" (the Hebrew word for humankind) from *adamah* (the Hebrew word for earth or soil) and the breath (in Latin, *spiritus*) of Yahweh-Elohim. The setting for the story is in the far south of the Mesopotamian valley, now part of Iraq. It is a dramatic little story in which Adam is split into the productive pair of male and female, with progeny who invent genocide as Cain kills Abel.

The next chapters are so full of genealogies that we need not wonder why the **Septuagint** translators titled it "Genesis." It is a very genetic book. That material culminates with a Jewish version of the Mesopotamian story of the Great Flood, a story that likely preserves the reality of the great floods that formed the twin rivers of Tigris and Euphrates some ten thousand years ago. (In Babylon the story was told as part of annual ritual.) It is clear from the names of peoples and places in chapters 10-11 that "the whole world" of that event did not extend beyond the Middle East, not even so far as to include northeastern Africa.

From there on, the Book of Genesis is strictly about the ancestral parents of people who knew themselves as Israelites, and the culmination of all those chapters is the deathbed blessing of all the tribes that proceeded from the loins of old Jacob, whose other name is "Israel."

Because the next book in the Torah is the story of the epic migration of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt to the hills of Canaan, it is known as "Exodus." In the Hebrew language, and hence in Jewish tradition, it is titled by the opening words: "these are the names." It begins with legendary episodes of the story of Moses and goes on to recount the story of how he led his people out of Egypt and into the Sinai desert. The climax of that is the delivery of the code of laws that are commonly known as the "Ten Commandments"— followed by the casuistic tradition that grew out of the code.

The role of Moses was double. He was not only the great liberator but also the great lawgiver. As slaves in Egypt, the Hebrews had to live as subject to Egyptian law that was embodied by the pharaoh. Now they would have their own code of laws, and that was as liberating as the exodus journey itself.

Though the basic code is commonly called the "Ten Commandments" they are referred to as "words" in the first presentation that we read in chapter 20. Fourteen chapters later, in Exodus 34, we encounter a remarkably different list that is declared identical to the first. To cushion the disturbance of that discovery, Ezra and his co-workers put chapters of other legal material between and prefaced the second version with a most interesting story. To discover that, we must read, in sequence, chapter 20 and then chapters 32-34. The account is quite amazing.

READ EXODUS 20 AND 32-34.

How shall we imagine the transmission of those oral traditions that eventually became components of the written Torah?

A most vivid clue is furnished for us in the twelfth chapter of the Book of Exodus, for there we read the directives for the celebration of the ritual of Pessach that have been followed ever since. It was in such occasions the stories about the event were repeatedly recited until they were committed to writing. And as Jewish people gather in their homes to do Pessach today they will likely read that chapter from Exodus.

READ EXODUS 12.

The third book of Torah has been named in honor of the ancient tribe of Levi because all priests and their assistants were supposed to come from that lineage. "Sons of Levi" was their identity, and so the book is known as "Leviticus." Its Jewish name, of course, is from its opening word that translates as "He (namely, Yahweh) called." The book is mostly made up of directions for the rituals that priests and other Levites were supposed to perform, plus general rules for conduct incumbent on all the people, including the brief command, "You shall love your neighbor like yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). The

traditions recorded in this document are clearly rooted in very ancient practices, yet they are presented in the idealized form as understood in the fifth century B.C.E.

The fourth book of Torah can be the most interesting to readers who love to encounter traditional stories in the most raw form or state that is possible. Its Hebrew name, *bamidbar*, means "in the desert" and that says much about its content, for it recalls the events that occurred during the journey from Mt. Sinai to the eastern side of the Jordan from where the tribes crossed into Canaan. It is a gathering of stories preserved by oral tradition, some of them explaining how certain rules and customs came to be. An excellent example of that is in the 27th chapter of the book.

#### READ NUMBERS 27.

Chapters 22-24 contain the most entertaining story of the whole collection, a story that includes a talking donkey! Though the story seems fictional, a recent archeological discovery made in northern Jordan reveals that the prophet Bil'am was a real character widely known in the area for some time.

The Christian title for the book, "Numbers," was taken from the Septuagint, of course, and provides no hint that there are fascinating stories in it. It only refers to the chapters that record tribal assignments for territory in the land to which they were journeying.

It is in this, the least known of the books of the Torah, that we find the most well known lines of scripture for both Jews and Christians. It is the blessing to be pronounced by the priests of the lineage of Aaron, ancestral patriarch of priests.

Yahweh bless you and protect you;  
Yahweh deal kindly and graciously with you;  
Yahweh bestow his favor upon you and grant you peace.  
(Numbers 6:24-26)

The fifth book in The Torah, known to Christians as "Deuteronomy" and to Jews as "Words" (*Devarim*) was actually written long before the others, perhaps in the ninth century B.C.E. As we discovered by reading II Kings 22, scholars agree that The Torah of Moses that was there brought to light as the temple was cleaned and refurbished was an early form of Deuteronomy, a scroll that focused on Moses and on the laws that were derived from the basic code recited in chapter five.

To Jewish people who observe Sabbath in synagogue services, the most significant message of the book is in 6:4-9, a set of lines known as the *shema'* that is recited in Hebrew more than once in each meeting for prayer or for the reading of the Torah. It serves as a basic credo for Judaism. To biblical scholars, chapter 32 is basic to the entire tradition of the prophets, and to those who simply enjoy the biblical story, the final chapter, 34, is important and quite moving to imagine.

#### READ DEUTERONOMY 6:4-9, 32 AND 34.

Because the Book of Joshua follows as a continuation of Deuteronomy, it is likely that the two scrolls were composed as a set that became foundational to the Kingdom of Israel as it broke away from the Kingdom of David at the death of Solomon. In later history, a people called the Samaritans kept this as part of their version of the Torah, giving them six rather than five books in the collection.

## HOW THE BIBLE HAPPENED: II

Scholars agree that the second segment of the Jewish TaNaK, namely The Prophets, was assembled in the fourth century B.C.E. It consisted of eight scrolls, namely, the Books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel (in two scrolls), Kings (also in two scrolls), Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Book of the Twelve, which was an assembly of eleven prophetic collections plus a series of three *massas* (a Hebrew word meaning "burdens") or supplements, attached to the Zechariah collection, but with the third supplement separated and labeled "Malachi" to make the ideal twelve of the collection. The first four are what we would label as history, the second four as prophetic message.

As already noted, the Book of Joshua reads as a continuation of Deuteronomy. To grasp the fact of this, one may read the last chapter of Deuteronomy and the first chapter of Joshua in sequence.

READ DEUTERONOMY 34 AND JOSHUA 1.

One of the interesting features of Joshua is that it quotes from an earlier written scroll called The Book of Jashar (the reference is in Joshua 10:12-13; there is another in II Samuel 1:17-27) which was apparently a collection of psalms (i.e., songs, poems).

As for the contents of the Book of Joshua, it begins with a series of stories about the conquest of the land of Canaan that produce the impression that the entire land of promise was taken. However, the stories themselves only account for a few sites in the southern region, chiefly in the tribal territories of Judah and Benjamin. The assignment of tribal territories becomes a major theme in the book, but the sermonic climax— and it is very much a large sermon— is in the final two chapters.

READ JOSHUA 23-24.

The Book of Judges is an ideal demonstration of how early oral traditions were brought together out of various tribal origins to construct a picture of cultural unity that did not truly exist until later times. In 2:6-3:4 we find a formulaic summary of the chaotic times that were the truth of the situation— a formula that is briefly repeated in 3:12-15, 4:1-3, 6:1-7, 10:6-12 and 13:1. The stories that are framed by that formula vary in length and style, and they differ in origin.

An especially good illustration of how old oral traditions were fused can be found in chapters 4 and 5 where we find two different accounts of the same event side by side. In chapter five we find a wonderfully archaic poem that glorifies Deborah, Barak, Yael and, of course Yahweh. Its provenance is the southern Galilee and the range of hills that separate it from the territory of Ephraim. In chapter four, by contrast, we read a more clarified account that has been written as prose. By comparing the two we get the story from two different points of view, one from the center of the event and the other as it was reported somewhat to the south. The differences are as important as what they narrate in common.

## READ JUDGES 4 AND 5.

A perfect illustration of how limited in scope each story can be is the rather lengthy story of Samson followed immediately by northward migration of his tribe, the tribe of Dan. Samson's name, which means "sun man" or "sun-like," is clearly a fictional figure who represents the imperishable spirit of his tribe. He is a true hero but, at the end, a dead hero. The factual account of what was happening is in chapters 17-18 where we read of the migration of that tribe to new land in the north where they capture the undefended city of Laish. What forced the migration? The growing incursion of the Philistines in the south where the Danites first claimed tribal territory. To understand the true but fictional portrayal of their will to survive and the facts of what happened, we must read all those chapters at one sitting.

## READ JUDGES 13-16 AND 17-18.

The book's collection ends with a dismal account of the way things were in the tribal period that preceded the founding of the political Kingdom. All the negative features of their tribalism emerge in the story we find in chapters 18-19, which one may well choose to read simply to better understand those tribally dominated times.

The double scroll Book of Samuel records the first major turning point in the story of Israel, the turning from tribal times to the founding of a kingdom. It does so by recording the careers of three very important men: (1) the priestly prophet Samuel, (2) the cattleman first appointed to be a central leader and then later anointed as King Saul, (3) the shepherd who became a powerful war lord, then king of his own tribe, Judah, and, seven years later, king of all Israel.

The story of the priestly prophet Samuel is told in three separate cycles, most likely preserved at three different sites. The first is in chapters 1-7 ending with the lines we read in 7:15. It was likely preserved and repeatedly told for some time in Ramah and at the other shrine sites that are named there: Shiloh, Bethel, Gilgal and Mispah. It begins with the legend of his birth and describes his rise to leadership of the Israelites in his area as they struggled against the expanding power of the Philistines.

The second cycle begins with a somber assessment of a weakening of his influence in 8:1-3 and introduces us to the man named Saul, a name which means "asked for." It reaches its culmination in chapter 12, where we learn much about the turning from tribal ways to the era of political kingship.

## READ I SAMUEL 12.

The third cycle is scattered through chapters 13-16 and records Samuel's rejection of Saul and choosing of the shepherd Jesse's son David. A remarkable after-episode is found in I Samuel 28:3-15, where Samuel speaks from the realm of the dead.

Saul's story, recorded in I Samuel 9-31, is a story that can be understood as a true tragedy in the sense of theatrical tragedy as defined by the Greeks. Early on in the story we come to know that he is doomed to failure and tragic death. As the chapters proceed, his story is more and more about a struggle to maintain his status in the face of a powerful rival.

David is introduced to us within the third cycle of stories about Samuel, in I Samuel 16. From there to the seventh chapter of II Samuel the story is composed of legendary episodes that were no doubt repeated often by his devoted followers. In II Samuel 7, a single storyteller seems to take over and that storyteller must have been David's own advisor, Nathan, actually writing an account that takes us through the second chapter of I Kings. It is a story of triumph, but triumph touched with tragedy. It is a most remarkable written biography from amazingly ancient times.

As Nathan produced the document, he had access to materials not included— or even in concert with— the popular stories that we find before it. In II Samuel 21:19 we find a note that seems to contradict the popular story about David's heroic stand against the Philistine giant, Goliath.

READ I SAMUEL 17 AND II SAMUEL 21:19.

As we discovered previously in the Book of Joshua, there was a collection of poetic materials, of songs, that existed as a written document in those early times. It was likely written on papyrus, as Egyptian documents were, or on a scroll of finely tanned animal skin. It was known as the Book of Jashar, and it is the source for David's beautiful lament over the deaths of Saul and Jonathan, both killed by the Philistines, that we read in II Samuel 1:17-27. This mention of such a source tells us that by 1000 B.C.E. Israelite scribes were already recording important cultural and cultic sources in writing— in the alphabetic script that they shared with Canaanites, Phoenicians and others.

The double scroll of the Book of Kings covers the period of national identity, beginning with the death of David and the enthronement of Solomon and ending, first, with the conquest of Israel by the Assyrians in 721 B.C.E., and later, with the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587 B.C.E.

READ I KINGS 1-2.

(Along the way, as we read in I Kings 12, the Kingdom of David became the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah at the death of Solomon, when the northern tribes seceded from the union.)

It seems quite evident that a first edition of the Book of Kings ended with II Kings 17, for it was written as a conclusion to all that came before.

READ II KINGS 17

And what came before? After the well-told story of Solomon's accession to the throne, chapters 3-10 present us with a rather official account of what seems a most successful reign of a talented ruler who put his little nation on the map as an important economic power in the ancient Mideast. First he established the government that his father was unable to bring into being, and from that he learned how to make deals with neighboring nations. (For people who know something of the ancient history of that area, he clearly imitated the Egyptians in his form and style of governance.)

Following that favorable account, chapter 12 gives us a negative appraisal of his administration and explains how and why it ended at Solomon's death. From there on, we are given a combination of anecdotal stories of some of the kings, statistical information from two sources known as "the chronicles of the kings of Israel" and "the chronicles of the kings of Judah" (two documents that must have been housed in the capital cities of the two nations, Samaria and Jerusalem, until the northern records were taken to Jerusalem at the time when Assyrians destroyed the capital city of Israel) and popular stories of the important prophets of that time who so prominently stood against their kings. Those stories were clearly kept with care and devotion by a generous portion of the general population. We encounter them in: I Kings 13: 1-10, in a story of "a man of God"; in 13:11-32, in a story of "an old prophet"; in I Kings 17-19, 21, and II Kings 1-2 where we read the long and dramatic story of the career of Elijah; in I Kings 20:35-43, where we read about "a disciple of the prophet"; and in II Kings 2-9 with its continuous account of the career of the dramatic disciple of Elijah known as Elisha. Because the stories of the prophets are told with such interest and positive bias, it would be easy to conclude that the first edition of I-II Kings was written by men who supported and admired the prophets but had reservations about their political leaders.

The final chapters in the twofold book, II Kings 18-25, are a sober recognition that the little Kingdom of Judah came to as dismal an end as that of Israel 135 years earlier. Three of its chapters, II Kings 18-20, are duplicated by chapters 36-39 in the great Book of Isaiah, though it is hard to determine which document lifted the material from one to the other.

These four books, Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings, recount a history that stretches from the twelfth century B.C.E. to the fateful destruction of Jerusalem that many Jewish people still lament and thus commemorate the event on the Jewish calendar date of the Ninth of Av.

The books that are truly prophetic in content are led by the great Book of Isaiah, whose contents come from three centuries of prophetic tradition. Its opening twelve chapters are the preserved messages of the master prophet himself as he performed his service in the latter part of the eighth century B.C.E. The next twenty-two chapters seem to be messages composed by his disciples or perhaps three generations of disciples. The fact that the man had disciples is well established by these lines from chapter 8, verse 16: "Bind up the message; seal the instruction with my disciples."

The first era covered by this book, the era of the prophet and his earliest disciples, is drawn to a conclusion by the chapters that duplicate II Kings 18-20, namely Isaiah 36-39. At that point we are thrust into the new era of the Persian empire that was begun by Cyrus, its founding emperor. The gifted poet known as "The Second Isaiah" is the author of chapters 40-55. A key passage within those chapters is 45:1-8, in which Cyrus is called "God's anointed," that is, God's *messiah*. His years were about 550-530 B.C.E.

READ ISAIAH 45:1-8.

The rest of the chapters, namely 56-66, come from a later time in the Persian period, from the fifth century B.C.E. or even beyond. We can think of them as spoken by the disciples of the Second Isaiah. All in all, this means that the original Isaiah founded a school of disciples whose work persisted for many generations. In those final chapters, the re-founded city of Jerusalem is central, and this included the problems that Jews faced in re-founding themselves as a religion, the religion that came to be known as Judaism. One of the lively questions was whether the religion should be restricted to ethnic Jews or be open to others who might be interested. The very first chapter of this final series addresses that.

READ ISAIAH 56.

When the Dead Sea Scrolls came to light, the discoverers found two nearly complete copies of the scroll of Isaiah. This would suggest the importance of Isaiah to at least one sect of Jewish people at a time when Rome controlled their homeland and permanently planted their calendar as ours.

The Book of Jeremiah is impressively long and impressively rich with detailed historical and biographical information. It is as much the story of that prophet— whose career paralleled the end of the Kingdom of Judah— as it is a record of his message. How did this come to be? The credit would seem to go to his personal secretary, Baruch, who recorded both the message and some events of the prophet's life. So it is that most of the Jeremiah scroll was actually composed in the prophet's own lifetime.

READ JEREMIAH 9, 39 AND 52 TO SAMPLE THE VARIETY OF MATERIALS IN THIS BOOK.

The next great prophet's words were also written as they were delivered. That prophet was Ezekiel, a young priest deported to Babylon in 597. B.C.E. when the first group of captives was taken there by the conquerors. As a deportee from a conquered country, he was most likely not free to proclaim his message in the strong oral poetic form of his predecessors. So he wrote it, mostly in colorful prose with highly symbolic language. The opening chapter of the book sets the tone for all the chapters that follow. As we visualize what we read in the opening chapter, we see a storm wind sweeping across the Mesopotamian valley from the west as a sign that one sovereign God is still in charge of the world. It is a message of comfort.

READ EZEKIEL 1.

Like Jeremiah, whose message he repeats in his own forms and style, Ezekiel knew that he was alive at a pivotal time in history. Just as Jeremiah had done, he depicts the ends of old political powers as their demise makes way for a new governmental order in the ancient Middle East. To capture that important message and to compare the words of master and disciple, we can read chapters 46-51 in the Book of Jeremiah, and then chapters 26-32 in Ezekiel. (Ezekiel's description of ancient Tyre, in 26-28, is so accurate that it serves as a primary source for our historical understanding of that central Phoenician city in ancient times.)

According to Jewish tradition rabbinic scholars debated much the inclusion of Ezekiel in a collection of sacred scripture. The reason? Its highly colorful and symbolic language would be hard to understand. One proof of this hazard is the fact that very many Christians think that the two chapters about the great battle between "Gog" and "Magog" at the mountain of Megiddo (*har megiddo* in Hebrew, *armageddon* in Greek) is about the triumph of good over evil at "the end of the world." It is not that; it is a vision in which two assembled armies do each other in at a site of many ancient battles. It is a grim commentary on what wars accomplish.

#### READ EZEKIEL 38-39

The eighth and last book of the portion of Jewish scripture named "The Prophets" is called "The Book of The Twelve," though it is comprised of the collections of only three named prophets, with three anonymous additions attached to the eleventh. These prophetic mini-books were not arranged in chronological order. Had that been done, the order should be as follows:

- 1-3 should be the gathered messages of Amos, Hosea and Micah from the latter half of the eighth century B.C.E. when the Assyrian empire achieved its greatest expanse, conquering Israel and most of Judah. They all speak of the invasion as a divine judgment and they all chastise the political and the religious leaders of their small nations for their sins and their inadequate leadership.
- 4 should be Nahum, who chronicled the conquest of Nineveh, Assyria's capitol city, in 612 B.C.E.
- 5-7 should be Zephaniah and Habakkuk, who were roughly contemporary to Jeremiah as the Babylonians made an end of Judah and Jerusalem, and Obadiah, as what some have called "a hymn of hate" directed against the Edomites for assisting the conquerors in the destruction of Jerusalem.
- 8-9 should be Haggai and Zechariah from the time of the rebuilding of the temple and Jerusalem following the return of exiles in 520-515 B.C.E.
- 10 should be the Book of Jonah, which is not at all like the other prophetic books, for it is not a message delivered in typical poetic form but is, rather, a parabolic story about a recalcitrant prophet who didn't much like the way God was directing the events of the world.
- 11 could be Joel, whose time in history is hard to determine because the contents are about a natural disaster in the form of a series of locust plagues. It is likely from the time of Persian rule.

- The 12th "book," called Malachi, is not really a book in its own right. It is the third of three separate *massas* that are simply attached to the last of the books in the assemblage, the Book of Zechariah. They are all from the time of Jerusalem's importance as a pilgrimage destination and the third of them was given the name Malachi from the importance of that word, which means "my messenger" in the third of its three chapters.

### HOW THE BIBLE HAPPENED: III

The third part of the Hebrew Bible, the part known as "The Writings," was not completed until the end of the first century C.E. One clear piece of evidence for this is the large fragment of the Book of Psalms that was discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls, dating from the first century C.E., the time of Jesus of Nazareth. The order of the psalms preserved there is not that of the final edition we have today.

So it is that when Jesus referred to the sacred scriptures of his Hebrew tradition, he spoke of The Law (Torah in Hebrew, *ho nomos* in Greek) and The Prophets. The Writings would be finalized and added three quarters of a century later.

The order of the books in this part of scripture as we now know it is as follows: (1) Psalms, (2) Proverbs, (3) Job, (4) Song of Songs, (5) Ruth, (6) Lamentations, (7) Esther, (8) Daniel, (9) Ezra, (10) Nehemiah, (11-12) I and II Chronicles. One could almost title this group with the word "miscellaneous" because its order is clearly not historical in sequence. Jewish scholars of the time of its gathering credited the task to the students of one Yohanan ben Zakkai, the great rabbi who escaped from Jerusalem shortly before it fell to the Romans in 70 C.E./A.D.

Of all the books in the collection, the Book of Psalms is the most well known and most frequently used by both Jews and Christians. This may be the reason for its primary position in the collection, for certainly those Jewish people who frequented the synagogue and more especially those very dedicated members of such a religious community as that at Qumran would have used it often.

The book itself is a collection made up of smaller, earlier collections. Many of these groups are labeled, making it possible to even chart the contents of the entire collection in order to see something of the process of how it came into being. The first most obvious prior collection is a group in which each psalm is titled "a psalm for David" (in Hebrew, *mizmor ledavid*) Psalms 3-41 are this collection. A second set in honor of David is comprised of Psalms 51-71, and within it is a psalm almost identical to a psalm in the first group.

#### READ PSALM 14 AND PSALM 53 TO COMPARE.

The only difference between them is that "Yahweh" is used as God's name at two points in Psalm 14, while "Elohim" is used all the way in Psalm 53. These contrasting divine names are characteristic of the entire group in each of these sub-collections.

A third group of psalms to honor the great father of psalmody occurs near the end of the collection, Psalms 138-145, which are clearly of a later date than the others.

Psalms 42-49, 84-85 and 87-88 are titled "for the sons of Qorah," a professional guild of temple musicians. A similar group, psalms for Asaph, represents another professional group of temple singers. Of particular historical interest is a set of psalms titled "songs

for going up," a set of pilgrimage psalms for the use of the many tens of thousands who made the journey from far and wide to Jerusalem during the time of the time of the second temple. These are Psalms 120-134.

There are two small groups of hallelujah psalms, relatively late in composition, namely 111-118 and 145-150.

Contrary to popular belief, King David was not the one who composed all the psalms. The true psalms of David are those found in the Book of Samuel, one of which had been previously recorded in the lost Book of Jashar. It may be that none of the psalms in the Book of Psalms are his compositions, though it is possible that segments were his contributions. A clear possibility for that is in Psalm 132, where lines 3-5 are quoted from an earlier source.

READ PSALM 132.

What most translators translate as "a psalm of David" at the top of the text is more accurately "a song for David."

The Book of Proverbs is quite clearly a collection comprised of prior collections. The oldest of these is a group of about 300 two-line aphorisms labeled "proverbs of Solomon." We find them in a section that begins with chapter 10 and continues to 22:16. Also very old in their origin are two Edomites traditions, one in chapter 30 and the other in 31:1-9. All three of these groups testify to the international origins of these materials, for the proverbs attributed to Solomon were gathered from many sources that stretch from Egypt to Mesopotamia. Solomon, who practiced international trade also encouraged international sharing of ideas.

Next in order of antiquity is a set of "Solomonic" proverbs attributed to King Hezekiah of the late 8th century B.C.E. They seem to be more of native origin in subject matter.

Those older materials engendered a literary tradition. The Solomonic proverbs were, almost all of them, two-liners. More developed sets of materials are found in 22:17-23:14, in 23:15-24:22 and in 24:23-34. Here we can watch the brief aphorisms developing into a kind of poetry with anywhere from 4 to 23 lines. The epitome of this trend is the elegant wisdom poetry of chapters 1-9 where such terms as wisdom and foolishness are personified as women. When did this happen? Most likely at the time of Hellenistic influence following the conquests of Alexander the Great in the late 4th century B.C.E. The result is elegant literature.

READ PROVERBS 4:3-27 AND 8:22-9:16.

A final addition to complete the Book of Proverbs is an acrostic poem composed of two lines for each of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The theme is marital advice for a Jewish religious scholar, particularly of the Torah tradition that produced the great

Talmud Torah. The woman portrayed is one so clever and capable that she leaves her husband free to dedicate himself solely to his studies.

READ PROVERBS 31:10-31.

The next book, the lengthy Book of Job, is an impressive literary production. It begins by reciting an Edomite folk tale that was likely quite popular in parts of the middle east, a tale about a man named Job who suffered a series of four major disasters despite the fact that he was a man of impeccable virtue. The tale ends with two remarkably well known statements:

- Naked I came from my mother's womb; naked I must return there. Yahweh has given, Yahweh has taken. Blessed be the name of Yahweh. (1:4)
- Should we accept only good from God and not accept trouble? (2:10)

But following this impressive conclusion to the old tale, the book becomes a lengthy verbal drama in which Job begins by questioning all that has happened to him.

READ JOB 3.

Then, succeeding this, the poetic speeches continue as three friends with the names Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar gather around him and try to explain that his troubles were punishment for some secret sin that needs to be discovered. In three cycles of dialogue they try and fail to prove this as Job denies them all the way. The scheme of those chapters, 3-31, is very much like that of a Greek drama.

In chapters 32-37 a younger contender with the very Jewish name Elihu tries to restate their cause but with no greater success. Job is left with no explanation for his misfortunes. At this point Yahweh— interrupts the drama and, in chapters 38-41, speaks through the voice of a desert whirlwind— a feminine voice! In the sounds of the whirlwind, Job is told that there are no explanations, that the world of God's creation is full of mysteries that transcend our understanding.

READ JOB 38 OR ALL OF 38-41.

As is typical for books of the Bible, a concluding set of paragraphs assures us that divine Justice did reassert itself as Job's friends are reprimanded for stitching lies to prove their point while Job's fortunes are restored. (Never mind, we might think, that he had already suffered the ultimate in tragedies.)

Song of Songs, a lovely book of poetry to be recited at weddings, is next in order. The likely reason for crediting it to King Solomon was the fact of his many royal weddings— all of which were for political reasons far more than for the romantic desires of the two youthful lovers who anonymously star in these poems. As we read it, the poems come together to form nuptial drama in which most of the lines are spoken by the bride, the

next most by the room and a few lines by women who could be called the bridesmaids. The contents are wonderfully sensuous and suggestive.

At the end of the drama a further poem is added, a lovely poem written on behalf of a young lady and her protective older brothers.

**READ SONG OF SONGS 8:8-14– OR THE ENTIRE BOOK!**

The Book of Ruth is next in sequence. It is based on a lovely oral tradition that must have been kept alive in Bethlehem for many generations. (Many of the stories of David in I-II Samuel are from Bethlehem's traditions as well.) During the first half of the 5th century B.C.E., when Ezra and Nehemiah and their compatriots were defining Judaism as a purely ethnic religion (see especially Ezra 10 and Nehemiah 13), this traditional tale was written down as prose. Because the story of Ruth is about the ancestry of David and because Ruth, the great king's great-grandmother, was a Moabite woman, her story contradicts the ban on foreign wives that was so strongly urged by Ezra and Nehemiah. So it was that someone who opposed those two leaders turned the story of Ruth and Naomi and Boaz into a beautifully account that became a model for classical Hebrew prose of that era. (That person may have come from the tradition of the prophet Isaiah, for Isaiah 56:1-8 clearly favors welcoming persons of other ethnic groups into the monotheistic religion of the Jews.) The Book of Ruth is an impressive example of using tradition to make an argument in a later situation.

**READ THE BOOK OF RUTH (the whole story; it's not long) AND ISAIAH 56:1-8**

Lamentations, the next book in The Writings, is a set of poems to be recited or chanted in commemoration of the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylonian armies in 586 B.C.E. All five psalms are songs of sorrow for the purpose of grieving. The first four are acrostic, a sequence of 22 series of lines that begin with the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The fifth one is not structured in that manner but it does articulate all the feelings appropriate to the occasion of a day of commemoration called The Ninth of Av (*Tish'ah b'Av* in Hebrew), for according to Jewish tradition it was on the ninth day of the Jewish month of Av that the city was destroyed.

This means that the Book of Lamentations is of religious use only to Jewish people who choose to remember that day as a day of destiny and, if possible, of journeying to the site of the ancient temple to ritually lament the event. Yet, because some of its lines are exceptionally beautiful there are those who love it as elegant literature. Such a line as "Behold and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow" is a well known example.

It became a tradition to think that the Book of Lamentation was composed by the prophet Jeremiah. Why? Because both center on the theme of Jerusalem's destruction. This can hardly be the case, however, for the style of the acrostic poems and the powerful poetic expressions of grief in the Book of Jeremiah are not the same. The prophet's expressions of grief are spontaneous, and beautiful, in part, for their spontaneity. The poems in Lamentations are formal and seem to be designed for ritualistic mourning. Furthermore,

the grieving prayers of Jeremiah express the grief of an individual but the laments in this small collection are those of a collective "us."

READ LAMENTATIONS 5.

Ecclesiastes, the next book in order, bears a strange title. Whether as *Qoheleth* in Hebrew or as *Ecclesiastes* in Greek, it is hardly the name of a man, for the word is feminine in both of those ancient languages and it designates an assembly of persons. Was it named in honor of that wise man's students— who in 12:11 is called "one shepherd," whose message is called "words of the wise" and, as we read in 12:9, "a sage" who instructed people. The contents of the book can be organized, though they seem far more to ramble after an opening section that ponders the question, "What profit is there for Adam in all the labor at which he toils beneath the sun?" Two portions of the answer to this question are frequently quoted.

READ ECCLESIASTES 1:4-10 AND 3:1-13.

The book closes after a lovely poem about death, with three editorial additions.

READ ECCLESIASTES 12.

Note: In some editions of The Writings, Lamentations and Ecclesiastes are reversed in order.

The Book of Esther, next in order, is a rollicking fiction in which the two chief characters have suggestive fictional names. "Esther" is the Persian word for "star" and her cousin and adoptive father Mordecai has a name that signifies "one who belongs to Marduk"— the Babylonian god of thunder! The story is set in the time of the Persian king Ahasuerus (in Greek, *Xerxes*) who ruled the empire in the years 486 - 465 B.C.E.

The book is about how Jewish people survived in a world of great political powers and hostile fellow citizens. The story is celebrated by the popular Jewish Feast of Purim and because the story lends itself to dramatization, many versions of Purim plays derive from it. As it has been celebrated for many centuries it has helped Jewish people to think about how it is that they have survived as a distinctive ethnic group for two and a half millennia. But the significance of that celebration has broadened beyond Jewish experience. The folk drama that evolved from the story is likely the origin of American theatrical melodrama and of Jewish theatre that grew so well in New York City and, in turn, became a major root of Hollywood cinema. The theme of the conquest of evil is surely a universal theme.

The Book of Daniel is a series of stories and visions that were written down in reaction to the harsh governmental policies of the Seleucid dynasty that arose as one of four "kingdoms" after the conquests of the great Macedonian conqueror named Alexander. It is, in fact, quite specifically in reaction to the restrictive and cruel policies of a ruler known as Antiochus Epiphanes who ruled— or misruled— much of the Middle East in the years 223-187 B.C.E.

The name Daniel is the name of an ancient Canaanite demigod (*Dan'el* in that dialect ) with the meaning "God's judge" or "divine judge" and the book is about divine judgment. Though the stories and visions are placed in *a priori* context when the Persians ruled that part of the world, the realities are those of the second century B.C.E. when the Jews of Jerusalem and its surroundings were being severely persecuted by Antiochus and his hirelings. Casting this material as of a prior time may have simultaneously made it somewhat politically safe while the events of the day could safely be "predicted" from a time past. The first six chapters are six stories in which Daniel is the hero, though chapter three features three of his compatriots: Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. The next six chapters are the predictive visions that speak God's judgment over the events that were brought on by Antiochus, particularly in the desecration of the temple that the despotic ruler caused in December of 167 B.C.E. The final vision predicts (after the fact) the liberation of the temple by the Jewish zealots and adjusts the date of that to fit careful calculations, starting with the imprecise "a time, two times and half a time" to 1290 days and then to 1335 days! That great event of liberation and the rededication of the temple is what Jewish people continue to celebrate as Hanukkah.

READ DANIEL 12.

The next two books should be read as a pair since they may enjoy the same author and do read as a continuing story. These are the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. (Parts of Ezra have survived only in Aramaic, however, for whatever reason.) In these two books we find the foundation facts and beliefs of the religion that came to be known as Judaism, such as the following :

- the rebuilding of the destroyed temple (in 520-515 B.C.E.),
- the rebuilding of Jerusalem,
- the centrality of priests and priestly rituals,
- the definition of Judaism as a purely ethnic religion.

READ EZRA 3 AND 7, NEHEMIAH 7 AND 13.

From the same time as the composition of Ezra and Nehemiah we have the double scroll of Chronicles as a revision of the ancient history of the Israelite people and especially of the story of the legendary King David. In regard to the latter, in place of the very interesting tale of the shepherd's son who became a most powerful warlord among his people, we read a very statistical summary of events leading to his kingship. And instead of the troubled transition to the reign of Solomon that we find in I Kings 1-2, we read of a trouble-free passing of the scepter and a story that tells us that David's most important accomplishment was to make preparations for his son's construction of the temple. The twin scrolls of this composition focus on matters of religion rather than politics.

READ I CHRONICLES 29 AND II CHRONICLES 1, then refer back to I Kings 1-2.

## HOW THE BIBLE HAPPENED: IV

Christian churches have traditionally divided the New Testament scriptures into two sets of books; gospels and epistles.

The division could actually be four- or even fivefold. The gospels can be thought as "good news" accounts in the world of Greek thinking for the Greek language had words for "news", "bad news" and "good news." The Greek word for "good news" was *evangelion*, which is the root of such words as evangelist, evangelism and evangelical. Three books qualify best as being this kind: the gospels of Mark and Matthew and Luke. The well known fourth, The Gospel according to John, is more a matter of interpreting than merely telling the story of Jesus, while the book known as The Acts of the Apostles reads as a continuation of the Gospel according to Luke and should be understood as a book of gospel.

What we know as epistles should be seen as two types. Some are truly letters written to particular persons in particular places and carried by the couriers of the time. These were mostly written by the apostle Paul and stand as the first New Testament "books" preserved in writing. Others, often called general epistles, were more in the nature of didactic or christological essays that were intended for general distribution. We need to observe this distinction as we proceed with the topic we are pursuing.

Earliest of the preserved gospels is the Gospel according to Mark. According to a second century source attributed to a man name Papias, Mark was a companion of the apostle Peter and the one who wrote down the gospel stories told often by Peter prior to his death at the hands of executioners assigned the task by the emperor Nero in the mid sixties of the first century C.E. This could well have been true. In any case, we must assume that the stories were a matter of oral tradition for a generation before they were written.

The Gospel of Mark begins with Jesus as an adult and one of many who listened to a certain prophet named John, in the lower Jordan valley. Mark gives us no account of Jesus' birth. He is simply one of the supporters of that one we now know as John the Baptist. As the story proceeds, we watch him gain fame for his ability to heal and for the fact that he was a teacher with his own disciples. ("Disciple" is from the Greek word for student.) He is regularly addressed as teacher by his disciples while he designated himself as Son of Adam. (*Adam* is the Hebrew word for "human" or "humankind.") He is portrayed as a serious challenger to the established leaders of his Jewish tradition.

READ MARK 2-4.

At the end of a lively, action-packed story, the leaders of the Holy City and the high priests of the temple demand Jesus' execution from the Roman governor and so he is killed by crucifixion as King of the Jews. This is followed by a brief account of how three of his followers, three women, come to the rock tomb where he had been placed by a sympathetic member of the city council and find the tomb to be empty. This is where the document originally ended.

READ MARK 15:40-16:8

As some translators note, a "long ending" was added. Because this is a point at which the New Testament gospels differ, it is important to compare it with the other accounts of later date than Mark.

READ MATTHEW 28:1-5 AND LUKE 23:49-24:11.

Though first in order, the Gospel according to Matthew is from a later date, seemingly a full generation later. The Matthew to whom it is credited was not likely one of Jesus' personal followers. Matthew was a very common Jewish name at the time.

As we scan this book, two things become very obvious. One is that Matthew's account is twice as long as Mark's. The other is its beginning in which we find a genealogy of Jesus that establishes his Jewish identity through Joseph. The other is a story of his birth that tells of Zoroastrian priests (magi) journeying "from the East"-- perhaps from as far away as Persia-- to view a boy whose astrological sign predicts that he will be a king.

As we look closer we discover that Matthew contains almost all of what is found in the Gospel of Mark, and follows Mark's order of events, but adds a great many teachings from the mouth of Jesus that were apparently unknown to Mark. The most well known example of these materials is the segment known as the Sermon on the Mount.

READ MATTHEW 5-7.

Scholars have surmised that there was an actual document made of Jesus' teachings that did not survive on its own but is also found in the Gospel according to Luke.

Because of Matthew's obvious concern to establish Jesus' legitimate Jewishness and to link him to Jewish tradition through quotations from the Torah and the Prophets, we can easily suppose that he was representing and addressing Jewish disciples. This possibility is corroborated by the fact that a Hebrew language version of this gospel survived among Jewish immigrants in Spain as late as the twelfth century C.E.

The opening lines of both The Gospel of Luke and The Acts of the Apostles indicate the same author. Therefore we can imagine something like the following. Luke, who was named as a companion of Paul in Paul's own writings and identified once as "the beloved physician," most likely became a Christian through contact with Paul and other missionaries. In four sections of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles we find journal material written by a member of Paul's traveling entourage that could well have been written by Luke.

**READ ACTS 16:11-8m 20:1-18, 21 and 27-28.**

This permits us to imagine that this journal was the start of Luke's career as a particular kind of evangelist.

Daring to imagine our way further, let us suppose that Luke felt such a deep desire to know more of the Master he had never met that he traveled to seek out that man's story, that he perhaps even ventured into Galilee and the region of the Jordan valley. (His gospel alone contains stories from that region.) Along his way he found materials that had already been written, among them a copy or partial copy of Mark's gospel and the collection of Jesus' teachings that had already been used or was at that moment being used by Matthew as a source.

In regard to that collection of Jesus' teachings, we find Luke using them quite creatively. Whereas Matthew inserted them into the story by setting them into five topically different sections as interruptions to the narrative flow, Luke joins those teachings to various stories at points where they make most sense. A clear example of this is the placement of the well known Lord's Prayer. Matthew presents that prayer as part of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew-6:7-13) while Luke makes the prayer part of a relevant story.

READ LUKE 11:11-13.

Among the materials discovered by Luke was an account of the birth of Jesus that has become quite beloved by Christians. Perhaps the most important feature of that story is its theme of redemption articulated in the psalms attributed to Zechariah, Mary and Simeon.

READ LUKE 1-2.

This theme of redemption, which is to reclaim the value of what has been lost, is central to Luke's well constructed story of Jesus. Beyond the redemption of Israel as a people that is in those psalms, Luke emphasizes redemption for countless individuals whose worth has been lost within their own culture. Whether it be the lost worth of a people or of individuals, reclaiming that worth is a central concern in Luke's gospel.

READ LUKE 15.

Luke concluded his story of the life of Jesus with a beautiful story of a resurrection appearance that leaves us in the Jerusalem temple with a group of Jesus' followers praising God. His second book, The Acts of the Apostles, begins there where Jesus' followers are still gathered, and that is where the story is centered for the first eleven chapters.

READ LUKE 24 AND ACTS 1.

Then we are moved to a wider range, to Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch until, in chapter 15, we are into the story of the apostle Paul and into material that Luke knew best and even firsthand. Paul is the center of the story all the way to the end of the book, where we

leave the intrepid missionary in Rome, staying there two years at his own expense. Time-wise we are into the 60's of the first century C.E., some thirty years after the crucifixion of Jesus. As for Luke's literary productions, they had to appear some time after that.

The Gospel according to John may be both the latest and the earliest of the four canonical gospels. Its opening lines may be of the latest level, probably from as late as the second century.

READ JOHN 1:1-14.

In these lines are ideas that became fundamental in the creeds of the early fourth century, creeds that are still recited by Christians today. Yet its account of the discovery of Jesus' empty tomb, which centers on the only woman to appear in all four such accounts, Mary of Magdala, may be a truly early account.

READ JOHN 20:1-18.

This book of gospel seems to be a document that developed over time, perhaps over a period of three generations. Other rather early parts may be the stories that are called "signs." In sequence they are as follows:

- 2:1-11, a wedding at Cana in Galilee;
- 4:43-54, healing of the son of an officer from Capernaum;
- 5:1-9, empowerment of a crippled man. in Jerusalem ;
- 6:1-15, feeding a crowd of 5000 people with two fish and five loaves of bread at the lake in Galilee;
- 9:1-12, healing of a blind man in Jerusalem.

As these "signs" and other important events continue through the narrative of the book, each is typically followed by a dialogue or a speech in which Jesus proclaims a message about himself. Indeed, Jesus does a great deal of talking about himself in the Gospel of John. Most of the basic understandings of Jesus that we read in this gospel are presented as verbatim from The Master's mouth. But who knew exactly what Jesus said? Was it the apostle John? Did some person take notes as he listened to Jesus? Four times in John there is reference to "the disciple whom Jesus loved." Who was that person? Traditionally people have assumed that this was John. All these are questions without answers.

So, as matters stand, there are these four gospels plus the one I have added to Luke's account. Unless the apostle John was the only eyewitness to Jesus himself, they all express what his followers understood one, two or even three generations later than the time of his very brief career. And when were those brief years reported in these books? According to Matthew, Jesus was born when Herod was still king of the Jews. Herod died in 4 B.C.E. Luke, trying to be precise about all things, wrote that he was born when Quirinius was governor of Syria. Roman records place that in a brief time that spanned the years 8-9 C.E. Later in his gospel, Luke informs us that he was about thirty years of age when he began his public ministry. Though that puts us thirty years later than Matthew's claim, the events are still prior to 40 C.E. The result: we have stories about

him that were passed on as oral tradition for a full generation before they were written. Yet we must understand that those stories were sacred to Christians even before they were written down.

There were other writings about him at the time when Luke set out to compose his account, as he tells us in the opening lines of his gospel. Aside from Luke's use of Mark's material and the lost account of Jesus' teachings none of these survived on their own. A bit more than fifty years ago The Gospel of Thomas was discovered in the sands of Egypt. It is of a date much later than the time of Jesus or even of the canonical gospels. And there are Christian books from the region of Syria that have long been known but only add fictional stories from the minds of devout believers. None of these ever were or ever shall be part of the Bible. (Some might wryly say that the less we know, the more we have to talk about.) Though there was no single assembly of all Christians at which an official decision was announced to establish which writings should comprise the Christian New Testament, we can be reasonably sure that these gospels and the epistles about to be considered were the sacred writings that would be part of the Bible for European Christianity.

## HOW THE BIBLE HAPPENED: V

Our first task is to further clarify the difference between the two kinds of epistles found in the New Testament collection.

A perfect example of a true letter from one to another is Paul's Letter to Philemon that fills a single page in the Bible.

### READ PAUL'S LETTER TO PHILEMON.

As you read it, observe the following: a form in which the writer not only identifies himself at the beginning but names those who are with him and then names the recipient and others with that person, a farewell greeting (verses 23-25) which also includes the names of others, kindly expressions of positive thoughts (verses 4-7) that move directly into the topic of central concern. And what is that topic of concern? A certain Onesimus (the name means "useful" in Greek) who is Philemon's slave has apparently escaped and found his way to where Paul is under some kind of detention or imprisonment. Required by Roman law to do so, Paul is sending the slave back to his master but with a specific request: that the slave be accepted home as more than a slave— as a fellow Christian and a free man. In the process of trying to persuade Philemon to grant this request, we come to know quite a lot about the personality of the apostle and his powers of persuasion.

At the end we are left to wonder whether Philemon did what Paul requested.

However, if we read the closing thoughts of Paul in his letter to the congregation at Colossae, we find: (a) it was the city where Philemon lived, and (b) that the former slave has become a useful courier in the service of Paul's mission (see 4:9 and following)! Information like this connects many of the letters written by that energetic apostle. As a result, those letters are valuable photos of the network of Christian communities that were founded by Paul and his fellow workers in Asia Minor and southeastern Europe.

The other letters credited to Paul were written to entire congregations or to congregations of a certain area rather than to such individuals as Philemon. These are letters to groups in Corinth (two in number), to Galatia (a territory), Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae and Thessalonika (two). The two letters to Timothy and the one to Titus may be past the lifetime of Paul and written in his name by another. His largest letter, the Letter to the Romans, is a statement of his thinking, his theology and christology, and his understanding of Christian ethics. It is more an essay than a letter for a specific purpose.

Other "letters" of this sort include the anonymous Letter to the Hebrews, the Letter of James that is attributed to the James (in Hebrew, *Yakov*) who was Jesus' blood brother, two letters said to be from Peter, one short letter credited to the apostle John and two very short letters from "John the Elder" and one equally short letter from Jude, "servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James." (Jesus did have another blood brother named Judas.) Some of these letters deserve special comment to help us understand further how the Bible happened.

In the years 66-70 C.E. zealots from Galilee declared war on the occupying army of Rome and swiftly carried that war into their holy city, Jerusalem itself. At much cost to both sides, the Romans won that war and destroyed the city and its temple in 70 C.E. During that siege against Jerusalem, or just prior to it, the Christian community that was there likely left the city, partly because they believed that Jesus had predicted the disaster and the destruction of the temple. Where did they go when they left? Likely to various destinations. How far and how widely they scattered we do not know but the Letter of James is addressed "to the twelve tribes dispersed throughout the world." In it the author emphasizes the values and ethical practices by which they should conduct their lives, wherever they might be. The letter is addressed to communities, and from that we must imagine several such groups who would be seed for the next generations of Christians in the Middle East if not beyond. They seem to be dominantly Jewish and are addressed as though they bear the tradition of Israel.

Another document that ensues from the destruction of Jerusalem is The Letter to the Hebrews, a carefully constructed message to Jewish people who have been devastated by that traumatic event. It is written in elegant Greek but its contents are so directed toward that ethnic group that we need to know a good bit about first century Judaism in order to understand it.

The destruction of the temple not only put an end to the yearly pilgrimages that made that temple, the center of their world. It also ended the practical functions of the priests whose vocation were dependent on that place. The anonymous author of the Letter to the Hebrews took his readers beyond that aspect of the tragedy, however. He went on to assert that the era of Moses was finished, that the laws of Moses had performed their historical function and were now replaced by the teachings of the Messiah whose name was Jesus. The book is a careful argument that aims us toward that conclusion. To the writer of that message, the age of Moses and the temple and its priesthood must now give way to the age of the Messiah. Its final two chapters state this conclusion.

READ HEBREWS 12-13.

There are two books that react to Roman governmental persecution of Christians. One is the First Letter of Peter; the other, The Revelation of Jesus Christ.

During the closing years of his life the Roman emperor carried out severe persecution of the Christians in Rome and, among other drastic moves, he ordered the executions of the apostles Peter and Paul. (The information for this comes from three Roman historians of the early second century: Tacitus, Suetonius and Sulpicius Severus ) The First Letter of Peter, written in good Greek and surely not by Peter himself, is addressed very specifically to a scattered people who are "enduring trials of many kinds." It offers advice, encouragement and hope.

The other book that reacts to governmental persecution is even more strongly hopeful as it asserts the triumph of the Christ over and over in its seven visions. The Book relies on

what was then familiar symbolism to structure its message, notably in its use of the numbers three, four, seven and twelve. (Note:  $3+4=7$  and  $3 \times 4=12$ .) There are seven churches of Asia Minor addressed with specific messages— all congregations that actually existed at that time, seven visions and seven seals within one of the visions. There are the twelve tribes of Israel and 144,000 members of those tribes ( $12 \times 12=144$ ) who are safe in God's care. Because of such mystical numbers and the highly symbolic and dramatic language of the book, Christians of many ages have become hopelessly lost in their efforts to understand what is not about "the end of the world" but an assertion about the triumph of God and his Christ over the imperial powers of Rome.

It is important to understand the kind of language that is used to express the message of an author who identifies himself as "John." This author writes from the island of Patmos to where he had been exiled by Roman authorities from his position as bishop in Ephesus. To gain some insight into the nature of his language, is advisable to first read the wildly imaginative vision found in the middle of the book and ending with the number 666 to identify the two beasts who are trying to destroy the child and its mother. (In the Hebrew alphabet that was used for writing numbers as well as for sounds, the letters for Caesar Nero add to the total of 666. In similar fashion, some Greek coins have abbreviated titles for Domitian (81-96 C. E.) that produce the same total and suggest that he was the second beast.)

READ REVELATION 12-13.

A final note: the Greek word for *revelation* is the word *apocalypse*. This means the "apocalyptic" should be a happy word about triumph rather than a word about disaster. What we can do to change the meanings of words over time is amazing.

The three little letters of John help us to understand that there were different "schools" of Christian tradition producing the writings of the New Testament. When we compare I John 1:1-7 with the opening lines of John's Gospel, we easily see a connection.

READ I JOHN 1:1-7 AND JOHN 1:1-14.

The largely misunderstood "antichrist" is found in this letter and defined as the thinking of those who denied the humanity of Jesus (4:2-3)— and there were such: preachers who supposed that Jesus was purely from heaven and not of earth. (The Gospel of Thomas would later express this view.)

Both the second and third letters of John are from "the elder," whoever he was. Both are very brief. The writer of the Revelation of Jesus Christ was the elder (*presbyter*) or bishop (its synonym in practical meaning and function). Was this the same person? Not likely but it is impossible to know.

**HOW THE BIBLE HAPPENED: VI**

Having come thus far we have finished looking at the Bible as most Protestant and Evangelical Christians know it. In fact, because most of these people are accustomed to thinking of the Bible as a single book— an authoritative, sacred book that simply and somehow appeared from the hand of God— this journey of learning has likely been an eye opening trip.

As explained at the start, that Bible is a combination of the Jewish TaNaK and the Christian New Testament. There is, however, a longer Bible that is used by Roman Catholic Christians and one even a bit longer that is used by Eastern Orthodox believers. It is a Bible that includes a set of writings preserved in Greek within an ancient version of Jewish scripture called "The Septuagint." The additional materials in the old Greek collection are known as "The Apocrypha" or the apocryphal writings. (*Apocrypha* is a Greek word that means "secret" or "hidden.")

Why the Septuagint? Early Christianity developed in a Greek speaking world, and because Jewish intellectuals of the great cultural center in the Nile Delta had been translating the books of their Jewish tradition into Greek, that collection of documents, the Septuagint, became the Bible of early Christianity, the Bible to which they would add their own New Testament writings.

Those Jewish intellectuals of Egypt were not part of the rabbinical group of scholars that determined the contents of TaNaK, and so they freely added compositions and translations of Jewish cultural tradition as they felt them to be relevant. It is important and interesting that the Roman Catholic and the Byzantine traditions accepted and still continue to accept those writings as biblical.

If we try to categorize them by type, we find that there are six books of or about history, five works of fiction (some merely as additions to biblical books), two books of wisdom, and two psalms. Following this outline rather than familiar sequences found in Roman Catholic or Greek Orthodox Bibles (or even in the sections of Protestant Bibles that include the Apocrypha) we can consider the following comments.

The First Book of Esdras begins with King Josiah's celebration of the Passover as it is recorded in II Kings 23, a public ritual that took place early in the period between 640 and 609 B.C.E. Using other biblical sources such as the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah, the text continues to Ezra's first public reading, of the Torah as recorded in Nehemiah 8. The Second Book of Esdras celebrates the career of one who can be called the "father of Judaism," portraying him as a man with prophetic powers. As he recalls Israel's history he seems to be privy to secrets that can only be revealed by God. The book even recalls pre-Israelite history, but with colorful imagination that represents popular Jewish understanding of their own story and the history of the world at a time which was likely of the second century B.C.E. This became early Christianity's understanding of the world as well. At the center of its recitation of history is Israel itself. The book goes on to imagine a future that is very much in the language of the visions that make up the last half of the biblical Book of Daniel. Both documents come from that same period of time.

The prophet Jeremiah became ever more important to their history as the founders of Judaism carried the story of their past forward into the new era in which they would have to live as a distinctive people among other peoples in various places. According to the 43<sup>rd</sup> chapter of the Book of Jeremiah, military officers who fled from Jerusalem before the invasion of the city forcibly took that prophet and his secretary, Baruch, with them to Egypt. As the Jewish community in Egypt increased in size, those two important men may have become all the more special to them and so we find two additions to their stories within the apocryphal collection. One is a book titled Baruch, the other, a Letter of Jeremiah.

Baruch begins with three and a half chapters of prose that moves between sermonizing and prayers and then becomes a series of psalms for the last two and a half chapters. Many of its lines are from earlier prophetic books. It continues into the document that begins with "A copy of a letter sent by Jeremiah to the captives who were taken to Babylon . . ." It is in prose and it is a warning against adopting the idolatrous religion of their captors.

The two books known as First and Second Maccabees are sufficiently historical in content to make them important reading for the sake of understanding the times that followed the conquests of the great Macedonian conqueror named Alexander and continued until the Romans conquered the Mideast in 63 B.C.E. The title of this pair of writings honors one of the sons of a high priest named Mattathias of the family of Hasmon, the son named Judah (in Greek, Judas) who earned much fame as a military leader, so much fame as to earn the nickname *haMaccabee*, "The Hammer." One cannot understand the biblical Book of Daniel without the aid of the Books of Maccabees. The first of these narrates the events of the mid second century B.C.E. with religious and patriotic embellishment. The reader who dares to become' absorbed in its story will find it to be a stirring book.

READ I MACCABEES 1-3.

The Second Book of Maccabees focuses strongly on the hero himself, Judah the Hammer. In 2:19 the author, one Jason of Cyrene, tells us that it is the story of Judas and his brothers and the story of the purification of the temple and the dedication (in Hebrew, the *hanukkah*) of the altar. Together with the first book this explains the reason for the ongoing Jewish festival of Hanukkah, now an eight-day celebration of the event.

The historical period explained in these books is the period of just before 163 to 63 B.C.E. when the Jewish people of the region surrounding Jerusalem realized a century of partial national independence under the leadership of a dynasty of priests, the Hasmonean dynasty.

The apocryphal works of fiction were likely composed as much for the purpose of entertainment as for any kind of edification. The fourteen-chapter Book of Tobit begins as an autobiographical soliloquy of the main character who poses as a pious and impressively righteous old man. In the midst of the third chapter another person of

exceptional righteousness and piety is introduced, a young lady named Sarah. As the story becomes more and more a short novel, an angel named Raphael is brought into the plot to play a crucial role. Many a modern reader may find the story to be quite interesting and also an introduction to a bygone world of magic well blended with religion.

The book titled "Judith" suggests that there was an era of feminist writing during time of Hellenistic rule. In stark contradiction to the account of Assyria's failed attempt to conquer the city of Jerusalem at the end of the eighth century B.C.E. as recorded in Isaiah 36-37 and in II Kings 18-19, the credit for the city's deliverance goes to this beautiful woman name Judith (the name means "a Jewish woman") who outsmarted the Assyrian general with the fictional name Holophernes (its Greek meaning being "crafty, deceitful") The crux of the story is when Judith uses her feminine charms to deceive the pagan general to the point of causing him to lose his head. Literally, that is. The story ends with a hymn of praise from the lips of Judith that reminds us of the song of Deborah in the Book of Judges. The themes of drunkenness, sexual lust and bloody gore suggest that persons were as much entertained by such in ancient times as now.

A section of The Apocrypha typically titled "The Rest of the Chapters of the Book of Esther" testifies to the fact that the Septuagint's version of Esther is simply longer than the Hebrew version included in TaNaK. And what is the more than makes it longer? Mostly more detail and more of other-worldly fantasy. Two (or even more?) versions of the same story suggest that the story was so very popular that readers and listeners wanted more and storytellers catered to their desires.

As with the story of Judith, the impressive beauty of Esther is important. And the lustfulness of men is a wearisome topic that never gets old. The "addition" ends with an emphasis on the importance of observing the celebration of Purim on the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> days of Adar.

There are two additions to the Book of Daniel. The first, titled "Daniel and Susanna," or simply "Susanna," is a funny but moralistic story of two lustful old men, both elders in their Jewish community, arriving from separate directions to lewdly spy on Susanna as she bathes in her courtyard garden. As they unintentionally meet, they both press her for sexual gratification. She cries out to attract help for protection; they run to the garden gate to pretend that they are responding, and as others gather, they accuse her of entertaining a young man other than her husband in her naked state. As the story goes on the reputation of the honorable lady is saved by the great judge Daniel (the name means "God's judge") who traps the two accusers in their lies.

A second, even shorter additional story is titled "Daniel, Bel and the Snake." In it Daniel exposes King Asyages to the fact that the great statue of Bel in Babylon is a farce. His technique is clever and ingenious but the story turns into a brief account of Daniel once more thrown into a den of lions where he is saved by a miraculous appearance of the prophet Habakkuk!

There are two substantial books in the apocryphal collection that are of the genre known as wisdom literature. The first of these is titled "The Wisdom of Solomon," a most appropriate title for the fact that it echoes the proverbs of Solomon from the biblical Book of Proverbs. It is more generally moralistic than the older material, however, and exhibits complete belief in divine justice --if not in this life, then beyond the grave. Composed in Egypt by a Hellenized Jew of the time of Jesus of Nazareth, it surely expresses rather popular Jewish beliefs about divine justice. Its last ten chapters personify Wisdom as was done in the Book of Proverbs as well and tries to demonstrate how God's justice operated in the history of Israel and in all creation.

The Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach, also known as Ecclesiasticus, was translated from Hebrew into Greek by its author's grandson who prefaced the text with a prologue about half a page in length. It, too, echoes ideas found in the Book of Proverbs, but it is also somewhat like the book titled *Qoheleth* in Hebrew and *Ecclesiastes* in Greek. Many readers find this book to be the gem of the apocryphal collection, though a bit too judgmental for many liberal minds who find themselves more comfortable with Ecclesiastes. It is replete with Jewish pride and is colored with what seems a grandfatherly tone.

Jewish love of psalmody is expressed by two short compositions that fill out the apocryphal corpus. One is titled "The Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three." It expands the story of the three named Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who were thrown into a fiery furnace in the third chapter of biblical Daniel, beginning with the line, "They walked in the heart of the fire, praising God and blessing the Lord." It was likely as inspiring as the story that inspired it and demonstrates how effective the Daniel stories were among Jewish people in the time that preceded Rome's conquest of the eastern Mediterranean world.

The other psalm, "The Prayer of Manasseh," is a confession of faith and expression of devotion. Though written a long time after the infamous Manasseh who succeeded the good king Hezekiah (see II Kings 21), it supposes that he experienced a change of heart after his sinful career. It is scarcely more than a page in length.