

Overview of the Bible 1 – ‘Written with the finger of God’: What is the Bible, how was it written, and why do we need it?

Sunday Night in the City, Bethlehem, 6 February 2022

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Tonight I will be preaching broadly from the Scriptures, including this text from Exodus 31:18: “And [the LORD] gave to Moses, when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.”

Let’s pray: Lord God, sanctify us in the truth, your Word is truth.

Why this series

Some of you will know the feeling of sitting down in front of the television at the end of the day to watch a movie, only to find yourself waking up an hour later. You stare at the screen, take in some of the characters and the plot, but don’t know precisely what’s going on. Perhaps you’re even one of those people who then asks someone else “What have I missed?”, adding insult to the injury of them having had to listen to you snoring for most of the movie.

Well sometimes it can be like that when opening the Bible, or even hearing a reading on Sunday. We launch in half-way through, not entirely sure of where we are, of who the characters are, of what has already happened. Of course, unlike a movie, the Bible is not meant to be read from the beginning every time. Because it’s the Word of God, it is profitable to just take it up where we find it lying open, or to prick up our ears when we hear it being read. Lives have been changed, souls have been saved, from such chance encounters with the powerful Word of God. But nevertheless, it’s also immensely profitable to take in the plot of Scripture. To place a reading in the context of its book. But also to place the book in the context of the whole Bible.

When Pastor Fraser invited me to preach for this year’s Sunday Night in the City services, we discussed what theme I might focus on and an overview of the Bible quickly emerged as a worthy topic.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly – [God says in Colossians 3:16] – , teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

For the Word of Christ to dwell in us richly, having a grasp of the whole story of Scripture is a great advantage. It’s a laudable thing to read through the Scriptures in our own devotions. Indeed, in the handout you’ve received, you’ll see that I’ve listed the biblical books that we’ll be covering in each of the ten sermons this year. You might like to commit to reading along this year, perhaps reading or listening on audiobook to the whole of the Bible, or some parts of it. But that will not be essential for coming along each month. For the Word of Christ already dwells in you, as you come to church each Sunday, and hear the Word. And this sermon series is designed for you to get an overview of the whole Bible just by coming to this monthly service. So when you open the Bible at any passage, you won’t necessarily have to say to those around you “What have I missed?”

What is the Bible?

Rather than launch into Genesis tonight without the chance for pre-reading, I thought that we could begin by looking at some broader questions about the Bible: What is it, How was it written, and Why do we need it?

So what is the Bible? Because there are 66 books in the Bible, sometimes the Bible itself is called a library. It's a collection of different books with different genres, written at different times, and, in one sense, written by different authors. But in another sense, the author is the same – the author is the one living God who created the heavens and the earth and who has gathered us here tonight. In that sense the Bible is not like a library, for the books are united together because they are all God's Word. You don't typically seek an overview of a library, but an overview of the Bible is just what we are seeking, unified as it is by being inspired by God, breathed by God, full of his Spirit, and without error. For Scripture is both the word of men, and also the Word of God, and it is both fully. There is no word that was just written by man and not inspired by God. There is no word that was just written by God, and not man. God inspires people to write, albeit with one interesting exception.

How was it written?

As I read at the beginning of the sermon, we hear this in the second book of the Bible, Exodus 31:18:

And [the LORD] gave to Moses, when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.

You will already be familiar with the story, of Moses ascending Mount Sinai and receiving from God the two tablets of stone on which the testimony, the ten commandments were written. But what is noteworthy here for us, is that they were written with the finger of God. God is the author and the scribe. His Word here is written by himself, with the finger of God. If you know the story, you'll recall that Moses smashes these tablets. When God gives him replacement tablets in Exodus 34, the language in the Bible is ambiguous so that it's not 100% clear whether God or Moses wrote the new tablets. Already the move has begun from God writing his Word, to God using people to write his Word.

Nevertheless, the beginning of the written Word is with God himself. In a similar way, the first human beings, Adam and Eve, were created by God directly, and from then on he has used families as his means for bringing forth new life. So with the Scriptures, the first words were written by God directly, and from then on He used means to write words.

The writing is significant, because Israel was largely an oral culture. Not many people could read, even fewer could write. The Word of God then, and today, is in many ways meant to be spoken. Indeed before God wrote the Word with his finger, He spoke the world into being. He didn't create the world with his hands, but with his tongue, his spoken words. And he also commanded Israel to speak the Scriptures: "You shall teach [the words] diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise" (Deuteronomy 6:7). In many cases, it's likely that some books of the Old Testament were first passed on orally, by word of mouth,

and that it took some time before they were written down in the way we received them today. In that sense, who wrote a book of the Old Testament might be a different question from who was the author of the book, such was the priority of the spoken word. This emphasis on the spoken word continues in the New Testament, in Jesus' ministry who with the spoken word casts out demons, and teaches with authority. The centurion does not ask Jesus for a piece of paper with God's word written on it, but rather "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed" (Matthew 8:8). And the priority of the spoken word continued in the early church and the church today, in which sins are forgiven, in which bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ, in which the Holy Spirit comes to us, by the Word that is spoken.

Most baptized Christians have not owned a Bible, and perhaps most baptized Christians couldn't even have read it if they did own it. But they all heard the Word. They all received the Word of God in church, at the font, at the table, at the pulpit. Spoken. Out aloud.

So it's all the more significant that once upon a time God himself was a scribe. For while the spoken word has a primacy, the spoken word is able to be manipulated, to be distorted to suit the ways of sinful creatures, not the ways of God. How was the first sin committed but by distorting the spoken Word: "Did God actually say?" the serpent says to Eve. And ever since then, up until our own day, in our own lives, we are liable to be tempted by the same serpent: "Did God actually say that?" Yes, He did, is our spirit-filled response. He did say that is a sin, and yes He did say that His grace is sufficient for you, and that he has taken away your sin by Christ's own suffering, death and resurrection. He said it, and you can delight in it. And not only did he say it, but he caused it to be written so that it could be secure, and trusted. To the prophet Isaiah, for example, God said of the word he had spoken to Isaiah:

And now, go, write it before them on a tablet and inscribe it in a book, that it may be for the time to come as a witness forever. (Isaiah 30:8)

In a similar way the books of the New Testament were written so that people in far off places and times could hear the Word of God with confidence, and so put their trust in Christ. St John wrote in his Gospel that "these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). And then right at the end of the Bible, in the last chapter of the last book called Revelation, St John records these words of Jesus whom he sees enthroned in heaven: "Behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book" (Revelation 22:7).

So while the Word of God is to be spoken, it is also written in a book so that God's promises are not subject to Chinese whispers, but can be depended upon with sure confidence.

The Structure of the Bible

Let's now return to some practicalities of the Bible that are going to help us as we navigate through. I've already mentioned that there are 66 books in the Bible. And you can see them all listed on pages 2 and 3 of the handout you will have received. There are 39 books in the Old Testament, and 27 in the New Testament. We divide the Bible in this way because the New Testament books were all written in the decades after Jesus Christ, and the Old Testament books were all written in the hundreds of years before Jesus Christ was born.

But, and this is a crucial point, that is not to say that the Old Testament is not about Jesus Christ. As Christ puts it in John's Gospel to the Jewish leaders: "If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote of me." (John 5:45) Nevertheless, when the Son of God takes on human nature to become a baby in the Virgin Mary's arms, all of human history pivots, and so does the Bible, from Old Testament to New Testament.

What the tables in the handout show is that not all biblical books are alike. On page 3 you can see that the New Testament has 5 historical books, 13 epistles or letters written by St. Paul (9 to churches and 4 to individuals), and then 9 epistles by others, including St. Peter and St. John. We'll have more to say about the New Testament when we come to it in our series.

On page 2 you can see in the 'Timeline of the Old Testament' that the Old Testament can also be divided into different kinds of books. This is an important thing to note, because sometimes people can read through the Old Testament expecting it to be full of continuous history, whereas only some of the books are history. The Timeline you can see in front of you puts it well. At the centre of the Timeline you can see the historical books, which tell the story of the people of Israel, and of the creation of the world beforehand. You can see that there are two levels of historical books, too. The bottom level are the 11 primary historical books, which tell the story in more or less continuous fashion, beginning with Genesis – a story we're going to pick up next month. The 6 secondary historical books – beginning with Leviticus – amplify the history of Israel by adding further detail to a particular period, rather than necessarily telling the next chapter of Israel's history. This Timeline is based around the 11 primary historical books, which are numbers, and the 6 secondary historical books are placed at the appropriate places, showing which period of history they amplify.

Moving to the top of the Timeline, you'll see that the Old Testament also has what are called Poetical Books. While they all make reference to historical times or places, they are not primarily historical. They all instruct us in wisdom, but in very different ways as we shall see. The author of this Timeline has placed them at different spots in Israel's history although you can take them all with a grain of salt. Job is not really set in the time of Genesis, and in the book of Psalm, Psalm 90 says it is of Moses, and so would belong more in the time of the book of Exodus. Nevertheless, placing the Poetical books somewhere can give a good sense of where they stand in Israel's history.

The final section of the Timeline is at the bottom, called the Prophetical Books. These books all are clustered around the time when the people of Israel degenerated into idolatry, and so were taken into exile, with God's holy temple being destroyed in Jerusalem, and then again when some of the Israelites returned. These books do fill in interesting historical detail, but their constant refrain is a prophetic call to return to the Lord.

The Language of the Bible

So having looked briefly at the New Testament and the Old Testament, we need to note one more important difference between the two, that of language. Generally speaking, we can say that the Old Testament is written in Hebrew, and the New Testament is written in Greek. Hebrew was the language of Israel. And Greek was the common written language at the time of Jesus.

Now I said that generally speaking the Old Testament is in Hebrew, and the New Testament is in Greek. But, we can get a little more specific.

Let's take the New Testament first. While it is written in Greek, Jesus and the Apostles would have spoken in a Hebrew dialect, often called Aramaic. At a few points, that Aramaic is preserved in the Gospels, like when Jesus calls from the cross "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani" which the Gospels then translate into Greek, saying that it means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). We also hear Jesus speaking Aramaic sometimes when he heals people. You may remember him saying "Talitha kum" which means "Little girl, get up" (Mark 5:41), or saying to the deaf and mute man "Ephphatha" which means "Be opened" (Mark 7:34).

Now to the Old Testament. While generally speaking it is written in Hebrew, there are some sections of the books of Daniel and Ezra that are written in Aramaic. Aramaic is like Hebrew, using the same alphabet, but a little different. Also, because the Old Testament was written over many centuries, the style of Hebrew does vary, just as English from 500 years ago sounds different to English today.

The Canon

But there's one more interesting thing about the Old Testament's language. About 200 years before Jesus was born, the Old Testament was translated into Greek – a translation called the Septuagint. I've already mentioned that Greek was the main written language of Jesus' time, so it was natural that Jewish people wished to translate the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek. This is significant for lots of reasons, but I just want to mention two. First, when the New Testament quotes from the Old Testament, it often uses this Greek translation – the Septuagint, rather than the Hebrew original. So even when Jesus quotes the Old Testament in the Gospels, the Septuagint is often the text he uses, which obviously gives a lot of authority to the Greek Old Testament. The second point worth making, is that the Septuagint – the Greek translation of the Old Testament – actually included more books than the 39 that are in the Hebrew Old Testament, the 39 that are on the Timeline on page 2 of your booklet. These extra books – with names like Tobit, or Maccabees, or Baruch – are often called the Apocrypha. From the early church, Christians have both recognised these as worth reading, while also agreeing not to derive doctrine solely from them. When Martin Luther came to translate the Bible, he included most of these Apocryphal books in his edition. Our English Bibles often do not include these books, following instead the Hebrew Old Testament which doesn't include them, but that's not to say they ought to be forgotten.

From the Bible's use of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, an important point can be made. While followers of Mohammed insist that the Qu'ran can only be in Arabic, and Jewish people to this day read out their scriptures in Hebrew only, Christians have always embraced the translation of the Bible. On the day of Pentecost, the Apostles begin proclaiming the mighty works of God in many different languages, showing that there is no one sacred language in Christ, but that the mighty works of God are to be proclaimed in every language. While Lutheran pastors learn Hebrew and Greek to get a deep understanding of the Scriptures, a good English translation is also the sacred text. Most of us here have heard of Christ only in English, were baptised in English, and receive the body and blood of Christ which is made so by the Word of God in English, a language that only came

many centuries after Christ. (As an aside, there is still something wonderful about including a few words of Greek and Hebrew in our liturgy – Hallelujah and Amen, and Kyrie Eleison)

When it comes to the New Testament, the 27 books we've looked at were all read in the early churches, however not all books were read in every church. There was some debate about whether some of the biblical books – like James, Hebrews, and Revelation – should be in the Bible at all. And then there was some debate about whether other books – like the Shepherd of Hermas, or the Epistle of Barnabas or the Didache – should perhaps also be in the Bible. While it was a few hundred years before the whole church began to decide on the 27 books we have today, it wasn't so much their decision that mattered. For, by then, it was as if the books themselves had simply chosen the church. The New Testament didn't only become holy when a decision was made. But they already were the holy Word of God, and holiness has a way of standing out in the church in the long run, as these books did.

Why do we need it?

Much more could be said about the writing and compilation of the Bible, about the way in which God has used history, space and time to reveal his Word to us. But next month we will launch straight into the text itself, Genesis and Exodus. For there is a danger that we talk *about* the Bible without properly speaking the actual Word of the Bible.

Words about the Bible can be interesting, but it is the Word of the Bible that has the power to save our souls, to renew our Spirit, and to bring us into communion with God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

I don't know about you, but I've found that the pandemic, combined with the increasing power of the screen and the digital world, has led our world into feelings of boredom, of ennui, of not really caring about much anymore, of disengaging with the wider world. That all sounds negative, but it's not necessarily so. Many things aren't worth caring about, or at least are not ours to bother ourselves with. And it can be wise to disengage from things that would take you away from Christ. Nevertheless, the world is changing, and in many places confidence in the future is at a low.

But in all of this revisioning of what's important, has there been a better time to be a Christian and to dwell in the Word? Has there ever been a better year for a sermon series on an overview of Scripture? For in all of the turmoil, and the confusion about what matters, the God is speaking through the Scriptures. They stand as the antidote, a cure to our fatigue and apathy. For The grass withers, the flowers fade, but the Word of the Lord endures forever (1 Peter 1:8). A re-focussing on the Word is just what we need. To give us confidence, to give us something that endures, that lasts, that we can hold onto, digest, and so grow closer to Christ, who is the same yesterday, today and forever.

In the week leading up to his death, Jesus told his disciples: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." (Matthew 24:35) Sometimes it feels like a lot is passing away in our world. So God bless you as together we hold onto this Word that will not pass away, and so receive anew the Christ who is the Word of life.

And the peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.