

The Holy Library

⁵ And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. ⁶ Then Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. ⁸ So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. (**Nehemiah 8:5-6, 8 NRS**)

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. (**Hebrews 1:1-2 NRS**)

¹² "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets. (**Matthew 7:12 NRS**)

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Now would be a good time to let the cat out of the bag. There is a group of younger adults in this congregation that get together once a month on Sunday afternoon. At first they called themselves POYC, which stood for Parents Of Young Children. Over time, they came to the conclusion that fertility wasn't the issue. Having children wasn't what defined the group. Instead, what they had in common was a lot of questions, and the group was a safe place to explore questions and doubts, and bounce ideas around without being ridiculed or judged, and that is a powerful experience. So they changed their name to Power of Your Questions, which conveniently, is still pronounced POYQ.

At each meeting we show a short video which gets the conversation going. Each video is led by a different minister or expert. For the past several months the videos have been about the Bible. Just last week, we were reminded that we Christians refer to ourselves as people of the book. It's a way of saying that we are people who are guided by and defined by the Bible. It's where we meet God, so to speak. But by always referring to the Bible as a book, which is what the word Bible means, we can distort our understanding of what the Bible is. The Bible is a collection of writings; it's a library of 66 documents. We call them the books of the old and new testaments, but even calling the individual writings "books" is a bit misleading. The documents in the Bible vary in length from less than a page to less than one hundred pages. We don't usually refer to something that's 40 or 50 pages long as a book.

How did the 66 documents come to be collected together to form the library we call the Bible? There were lots of writings to sort through. A couple of hundred years before Christ there were a lot of Jews living in Alexandria, Egypt. Many didn't read or speak Hebrew and so 57 of the ancient Hebrew writings were translated into Greek, which was widely used in commercial, legal, and educated circles around the Mediterranean Sea. But in the homeland of the Jews and in other areas where large numbers of Jews lived, fewer of the ancient writings were in common use. While the writings of the prophets and the five texts that were called the books of Moses were widely accepted as scripture, there was a little less consensus about what other documents were suitable to use as scripture. But, a little after 100 AD, the councils of rabbis had reached agreement that of the 57 writings that had been translated into Greek, 39 were worthy of being called scripture.

Similarly, there were many Christian documents that were circulated among the early churches. Through the decades, as more and more copies were hand copied and passed around, churches gradually collected documents and then passed them on. Around 140 AD, a man named Marcion declared that the whole Old Testament should be dumped and that the only valid scriptures for Christians were ten letters written by Paul and the gospel of Luke after Marcion had edited it. The church rejected Marcion's teaching and excommunicated him, but it raised the question, what writings were scripture for Christians?

In one of the videos that POYQ viewed, Eric Elnes said that the process of defining what documents were scripture was a bit like mining for gold. Which texts had the highest value, the greatest gold content? They looked at who wrote the text, and especially valued things written by the apostles or someone who had been taught by an apostle. They considered how useful a document was in learning about Jesus and the Christian way of life. And they considered how weird it was. Stories about the childhood of Jesus that had him killing playmates who made him mad were unacceptable, to say the least. Over time, various church leaders would compile a list of writings that were being used in the region where they lived. The old Hebrew documents that had been translated into Greek in Alexandria were accepted. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Paul's letters were on everybody's list early on. John's gospel and the shorter letters began to have widespread acceptance. In the late 200s Revelation was used in quite a few places. But the first list of writings that was exactly the same as our New Testament was in a letter written in 367 AD.

That wasn't the end of the discussion. During the Reformation in the 1500s, the Protestants deleted 18 works from the Old Testament which brought it into agreement with the Jewish Bible, and there was talk of dropping both James and Revelation.

But for about 1100 years, there was essentially one official Christian Bible. It was called the Vulgate and it was in Latin. It would take two monks about four years to make a single copy of the Bible. Latin soon ceased to be a common language and eventually only the priests and other church officials could read the Latin text. The only access that everyone else had to the Bible was through sermons, public readings, and dramas.

In 1440 the printing press was invented. In the early 1500s Martin Luther translated the Bible into German. There were some early translations into English which were outlawed. The English Anglican church approved the Great Bible in 1535 during the reign of Henry the VIII. The Bishop's Bible as approved in 1568. The most famous English translation was published in 1611 and came to be known as the King James Version. What many people don't know is that it was revised in 1769 and it is that revision that is published as the KJV today.

We will continue this topic next week, but I want to offer a bit of personal testimony before I close. Until I was nineteen, I never gave any thought to how we came to have the Bible. It just wasn't a question that crossed my mind. I had never heard it mentioned in a sermon or in a Sunday School class. If someone had asked me, "How did the Bible come to be?" I probably would have mumbled something about God giving us this holy book. I never would have put it this way, but it was as if I thought that God had handed us the Bible already bound in black leather.

When I learned a bit of the history of the Bible, it shook my assumptions. I no longer saw the book itself as holy. We are told that God wrote the Ten Commandments on stone tablets and gave them to Moses. The rest of the Bible is the best effort of our spiritual ancestors to describe the God that they knew, their relationship with God, and how that changed their lives. The book isn't holy: it

points to the holy One. Don't worship the Bible. Don't make an idol of it. Read it and study it. Dog-ear the pages where you find something especially significant. Write in the margins, underline, and highlight. Mine the spiritual gold found within the pages of the Bible. Amen.

Sisters and brothers,
The Bible is a library that points to God.
Be aware of what genre of literature you are reading when you study it.
Be thankful for all those who mined all of the ancient writings
for these documents that contain golden wisdom,
but do not fall into Bible idolatry.