INTRODUCTION TO THE BIBLE

Lecture One

The Book of Books

The Bible, without question, is the most profound, influential and widely read piece of literature in the history of mankind. It has been aptly described as the Book of Books, a Divine Library. The Bible was written over a period of 1500 years, involving some 40 different authors, spanning 40 generations, and written on three different continents. Authors involved have included Kings, peasants, fishermen, poets, statesmen, scholars, doctors and tax collectors. Locations of writing have varied from the wilderness for Moses, hillsides and palaces for David, a prison for Paul, a dungeon for Jeremiah, an island of exile for John and in transit for Luke. Prevailing conditions at times of writing have covered everything from peacetime to war, siege to surrender, feast to famine. Despite this vastly divergent background, a beautiful harmony binds together the volumes of the Bible into one Book, with one author - God, and one whole story (His-story).

Men living centuries apart and in different continents wrote of the same redeeming, loving God and of His redemption plan for mankind. Surely this would have been utterly impossible had it not been for the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the mind of God working through men to pen a revelation of Himself, captured for all time and for all generations in the Book of Books, the Bible. One could hardly visit a modern library and find just two books by two different men on the same subject that agree in all points.

Historian Werner Keller: “There is absolutely no book in human history which has had such a revolutionary influence or which has so decisively affected the development of the western world...No book has had such a world wide effect as the ‘Book of Books’”

Winston Churchill: “We reject with scorn all these learned and laboured myths that Moses was but a legendary figure. We believe that the most scientific view, the most up-to-date and rationalistic conception, will find its fullest satisfaction in taking the Bible literally. We may be sure that all these things happened as they are set out in Holy Writ. In the words of a forgotten work of Mr Gladstone, we rest with assurance upon the ‘impregnable rock of Holy Scripture...’ Let the men of science and of learning expand their knowledge and probe with their researches every detail of the records which have been preserved to us from these dim ages. All they will do is to fortify the grand simplicity and essential accuracy of the recorded truths which have lighted so far the pilgrimage of man”.

A Christian appraisal: “This book contains the mind of God, the state of man, the way of salvation, the doom of sinners and the happiness of believers. Its doctrines are holy, its precepts are binding, its histories are true, and its decisions are immutable. Read it to be wise, believe it to be saved, and practice it to be holy. It contains light to direct you, food to support you, and comfort to cheer you. It is the traveller’s map, the pilot’s compass, the soldier’s sword, and the Christian’s charter. Here Paradise is restored, Heaven opened and the gates of hell disclosed. Christ is its grand subject, our good its design and the glory of God its end. It is the Book of Books - God’s Book - the revelation of God to man.”

The Power of the Bible

Perhaps the greatest testimony to the power of the Bible is the fact that for the last 2000 years, it has changed countless lives, all for the better. Time and again the world has witnessed people, great and small, rich and poor, brilliant or simple provide abundant evidence of how the Bible has changed their lives. Religion and ideologies seek to mould men with their external pressures and ritual, yet the beauty of God’s Word is the change it brings about in the heart of man, changing from the inside out, and therein lies the awesome power of the Bible.

The secret lies in the truth of Jeremiah 1:12: “I am watching over My Word to perform it.” (RSV) Behind and beneath the Bible, above and beyond the Bible, is the God of the Bible. Even the enemies of the Bible - communists, Jews and Muslims have shown their belief in the power of the Bible by their attempt to prevent the reading of the Bible in countries under their control. Strange that these same people do not object to the spread of Greek mythology and other such literature. But they vehemently oppose and try to stop the reading of the Bible.

What is the Bible

The term “Bible” refers to “the whole collection of writings containing the record of Divine Revelation“ It has also been defined as the “Books of the Old and New Testaments given by inspiration of God, containing everything which we are to believe and do, that our souls may be saved and God served.” Jerome of the 4th century called it a “divine library”. The actual word Bible is derived from the Greek “ta Biblia”, which means “the books”. This springs from the Old Testament Scriptures being called “the books (Daniel 9:2). This must be a reference to Daniel’s collection of Scriptures, which obviously included the book of Jeremiah to which he is referring. In the New Testament the term “Scripture” is commonly used (Matt 21:42, Jn 5:30, 2 Tim 3:16).

The Greek word translated “Scripture” means “writing”, or “something written”, and is used in both singular and plural to refer to the Bible. Thus in conclusion, by the term Bible, the collection of books or writings which are the divinely inspired revelation by God of Himself to mankind is referred to.

The Bible itself comprises 66 books, 39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New. The language of the Old Testament is mainly Hebrew with a little Aramaic, and almost entirely Greek for the New

Testament. The word “Testament” can also be understood as “Covenant”. The first 39 books of the Bible, the Old Testament, deal with God’s covenant relationship with Israel, while the remaining 27 books are concerned with the New Covenant introduced by the Lord Jesus Christ (Mark 14:24).

The Canon of Scripture

The word canon comes from the root word “reed” (English word cane, Hebrew from ganeh and Greek kanon). The reed was used as a measuring rod and eventually meant “standard”. Origen used the word “canon” to denote what we call the “rule of faith”, the standard by which we are to measure and evaluate. Later it meant a list or index. Applied to Scripture it means an officially accepted list of books, the authoritative collection of books which Christians recognise as God’s Word. Thus the books by which all else are to be measured are called “the canon”. In Revelation 11:1-2 the “rod” by which the “temple”, i.e. the Church, is to be measured undoubtedly represents the Bible, the “measuring rod” or “canon” of Scripture.

Old and New Testaments. It is important to bear in mind that the Church only recognises those books which are canonical. The Church does not give the Bible its authority but merely recognises the authority which it already has because it is inspired by God. Thus the Holy Spirit inspired and directed the writing of the books of Scripture, but there were many books claiming such inspiration, and the Church recognised which truly had authority as God’s revelation (1 Thess 1:5, 2:13). Revelation and Inspiration will be dealt with more fully in a later lecture. But it is worth noting some basic guidelines used in determining which books truly had the authority of God upon them. One could of course accuse the church of simply recognising those books which fit in with its ideas. But in fact tests were applied to avoid the pitfall of circular reasoning.

It has been said that the law of canonicity for the Old Testament was that each book included must have been written, edited or endorsed by a prophet. For us Christians, a far more telling test was Christ’s witness to the Old Testament. Jesus told the disciples (Lk 24:44) that all things written about Him in the law of Moses, and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled. Jesus was thus confirming the three major sections into which the Hebrew Bible is divided, the Pentateuch, the Prophets and the Writings. Two Scriptures are worth noting here - Matt 5:17-18 and John 10:35. It is clear from reading the Gospels that Jesus never disputed the Hebrew Old Testament canon, but rather the interpretation given it by the Scribes and Pharisees. Indeed our Lord constantly appealed to the Old Testament for his authority, quoting often and extensively. This, added to the scrupulous tests of authenticity the Jews used in determining Scripture, means that we can be very sure that the Old Testament as we have it contains the right books. Regarding the New Testament, the chief test for canonicity was the apostolic witness. In the terminology of the New Testament, the church was build upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Eph 2:20) whom Christ had promised to guide into all the truth (Jn 16:13) by the Holy Spirit. Acts 2:42 further tells us that the Church at Jerusalem continued in the apostle’s doctrine (teaching). The term “apostolic” as used for the test of canonicity, can mean either apostolic authorship or approval. To have a place in the New Testament a book must have been written or endorsed by an apostle, or received as possessing divine authority in the Apostolic age.

The Apocrypha. This is the name given to certain books which were included in the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint), but which were never part of the Hebrew canon and did not form part of the Old Testament used by Jesus and validated by Him (Matt 5:17-18, Jn 5:35 - the books of the apocrypha are not quoted anywhere in the New Testament as Scripture). The term apocrypha comes from the Greek “apokruphos” and means “hidden” or “concealed”. The name probably arose because the books were withdrawn from public use and were not considered part of sacred Scripture by either the Hebrews of early Christians. The books were however included in the Greek version of the Old Testament, and from there found their way into the Latin Vulgate translation of the Bible made in the 5th century. The Latin Vulgate was virtually the only available translation for the next thousand years or so. With the advent of the Reformation in the 16th century, the Protestants based their movement on the Divine and infallible authority of God’s Word, and they immediately rejected the books of the apocrypha as having no Divine authority. The Roman Catholic Church, in countering the Reformation, called the Council of Trent in 1546 and there declared 11 of the Apocryphal books to be “deutero-canonical”, i.e. of second class inspiration, and they have been included in the RC Old Testament ever since. It is difficult to see how something can be of second class inspiration! Either it is or it isn’t. The problem is that many ideas peculiar to RC doctrine find their source in this second class inspiration.

The Church of England and Lutheran Churches adopt an attitude which is well summed up in the Anglican “39 Articles of belief” as follows: “They may be read for example of life and instruction of manner; but yet are not to be applied to establish any doctrine.” This may be contrasted with what the same article says of the Bible: “Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation; so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.” Other Reformed Churches give the apocryphal books no status at all.

Reasons for exclusion of the books of the apocrypha from the canon include the following:

• They abound in historical and geographical inaccuracies and anachronisms.

• They teach doctrines which are false and foster practices which are at variance with inspired Scripture.

• They resort to literary types and display an artificiality of subject matter and styling out of keeping with inspired Scripture.

• They are never quoted by Jesus and not mentioned anywhere in the New Testament.

• Early Church Fathers considered them uninspired.

• They did not gain inclusion in the ancient Hebrew canon.

• They lack the distinctive elements which give genuine Scripture their divine character, such as prophetic power and poetic and religious feeling.

The Pseudepigrapha. This term is used to describe those Jewish writings which were excluded from the Old Testament Canon and which find no place in the Apocrypha. Unlike the apocryphal books which were included in the Greek translation of the Bible, these pseudepigrapha never approached canonical status. They are nevertheless valuable for the light they shed on the Jewish background of the New Testament. Most of these books were attributed to famous figures - hence the name (Pseudos meaning false). Perhaps some of the better known books in this category are the “Book of Enoch” and the “Apocalypse of Baruch”.

Similar false writings were also produced in New Testament times, e.g. “The Gospel of Thomas” and the “Acts of Paul”. This practice was condemned from the outset in the church and it is recorded by Tertullian (2nd Cent) that the author of “Acts of Paul” who was an elder in Asia Minor and who confessed to writing the book out of admiration for Paul, lost his office for this offence. Another example of the modern pseudepigrapha is the Aquarian Gospel.

How the Books are arranged.

The Hebrew Old Testament

LAW (Torah) - Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy.

PROPHETS (Nebi’im) - Consisting of “former” and “latter” prophets.

Former - Joshua, Judges, 1&2 Samuel and 1&2 Kings.

Latter - Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the 12 Minor prophets.

WRITINGS (Ketubim) -Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Solomon’s Song,

Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah

and 1&2 Chronicles.

By counting the 2-part books such as Ezra/Nehemiah and 1&2 Chronicles as one book each, the Jews arrived at a total of 24 books. You may wonder why the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings are known as the “former prophets” in the Hebrew canon. It is because they were written by prophets or from prophetical records (2 Chron 9:29 - a reference to a book written by the prophet Nathan which is now probably part of Samuel and Kings.

The Greek Old Testament (Septuagint or LXX)

PENTATEUCH (Law) - Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy.

HISTORY - The “former prophets” plus Ruth, Ezra, Nehemiah, 1&2 Chronicles.

POETRY WISDOM LITERATURE - Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Solomon,

Ecclesiastes.

PROPHECY - “Latter prophets” plus Lamentations (after Jeremiah) and Daniel

(after Ezekiel)

APOCRYPHA - Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, Jeremy, 1&2

Maccabees.

Our Bible

The Bible as we know it, regarding the Old Testament, follows the order of the books of the Septuagint, but contains only the books in the Hebrew canon.

Thus our Old Testament is as follows:

PENTATEUCH - Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy.

HISTORY - Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1&2 Samuel, 1&2 Kings, 1&2

Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther.

POETICAL - Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of

Solomon.

PROPHETIC - Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel,

Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum,

Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi.

OUR NEW TESTAMENT IS AS FOLLOWS:

GOSPELS -Matthew, Mark, Luke, John.

HISTORY - Acts.

PAULINE EPISTLES - Romans, 1&2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians,

Philippians, Colossians, 1&2 Thessalonians, 1&2

Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews.

GENERAL EPISTLES - James, 1&2 Peter, 1&2&3 John, Jude.

THE BOOK OF REVELATION