

October 20, 2017
(July Letter)

Dear Samantha,

I got to thinking about the bible questions you were asking when we were hanging out last September, so decided to provide some of the general ideas I have picked up over my years of research on them. Most of these are dredged from my Religious Studies courses and reading at university, so they are rather rusty, but you might find them useful at some points.

I have always found the study of the bible interesting – but not so much as an instruction booklet, but for the background research on its origins, assemblage, transformations, and social context. I guess this was my way of dealing with some of the contradictory materials I found in it and the way in which it didn't make sense to me as a guide to behavior. As a point of reference for some interesting ideas, however, I continue to find it interesting.

Here are a few perspectives I have come to at the current time. These may change, of course, as I learn more and new scholarship emerges.

1. The (Christian) bible is a collection of stories and related material compiled by various people and groups as a record of their history, ways of viewing the world, and advancing their interests at various times and places. To understand its meaning and significance, it is important to know as much as we can about the origins of the materials chosen, the social, political, and religious context of the people and groups making the choices of what's in and what's out, and the possible objectives the "choosers" had when making the choices.
2. There are several versions of the bible according to different periods and religious groups. The versions with which we are familiar in the United Church vary somewhat from those in other churches and in some cases include a slightly different collection of that chapters (or "books"). The most well known variations are found with the inclusion or exclusion of the Apocrypha. The Wikipedia entry entitled "Books of the Bible" has some nice charts which give an idea of the books, their original languages, and when they were "canonized" (were officially made parts of the bible). Most canonization took place in the 1500s.
3. The interpretations of the writings are always clouded by the problem of translation, since the words used for modern languages will not have the same meaning as during the period in which they were written. For example, much of the earliest material was written in an archaic form of Hebrew or Aramaic. The first translation was then into Greek, then Latin (reflecting the relative power of various cultures in the ancient world).
4. Understanding the significance of the stories contained in the bible can also be revealed by looking at the stories that were rejected as part of the bible in its construction. Since there are several different collections (called "canons") this can be complicated since different canons are then used by subsequent groups and organizations as part of their own. For example, the Protestant canon has 66 books, but the Ethiopian Orthodox Church has 81.
5. At a very general level, the bible books can be divided into the following groups.

Old Testament: These are books taken from sources that were mostly part of the Jewish canon (the Hebrew Bible) – and produced before the presumed birth of Jesus. They include the following groups.

- The Pentateuch or the Five Books of Moses. These are the first five books (Genesis to Deuteronomy). Genesis and Exodus are a collection of stories about creation and the early history of the Jews – up to the time they took over the land of the Canaanites. It includes two different creation stories (Genesis 1:1 to Genesis 2:4 and Genesis 2:5 to Genesis 12:3), the emergence of Abraham's family as a dominant one, and the development of the Jewish temple and laws. Leviticus identifies a large number of rules for the interpretation of the laws. Deuteronomy provides some more stories about Abraham and his family along with some more laws and their interpretation. You will see from these stories that God

was a rather nasty dude. He demands stoning for adultery, the acceptance of slavery, land grabbing, genocide, and the subjugation of women – among other things. Most of these are conveniently forgotten by the fundamentalists and they create a big problem for those who view the bible as the “word of God”.

- Twelve historical books. These books continue with the history of the Jews and related stories. They cover the period from the Jews’ taking over the land of the Canaanites to their exile to Babylon. Several of them were probably written when the Jews were in exile – so we can assume that they were part of an attempt to construct and preserve the stories of their origins. They cover the period when the Jews moved from a religious cult to a more official religion – complete with king, priests, and a temple (Saul, David, etc.). Unfortunately, this temple was destroyed and the Jewish leaders were exiled to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon round 597 BCE.

This period of exile is an important one since it created a crisis for Jewish religion. Up to that time, they believed that God was found within the scrolls of the ark (containing the early books with their rules about proper behavior) and the ark was associated with the Temple. Once the temple was destroyed, the ark taken, and their leaders exiled they were left without access to God. In addition, with the destruction of these artifacts and their occupation by the Babylonians, the belief that God would protect them was thoroughly challenged.

We see from some of the writings of the prophets (see below) that it was during this time, their ideas changed about God. First, God became “spiritualized” – first becoming embodied in the soil. Some of the Jews took soil with them from Jerusalem and used that as a focus of worship. Second, the interpretation of God’s support started to change. The fall of Jerusalem was interpreted by the prophets as God’s punishment for failing to follow his laws.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah recount the period where the Jews return to Canaan and attempt to restore the temple. This occurred because the Persians (Cyrus the Great) conquered Babylon in 539 BCE. This period was also characterized by conflicts between the Pharisees and Sadducees: two groups of priests who were struggling for control of the temple. This second temple was also destroyed about 70 BCE after the Jews rebelled against the Romans.

- Five Wisdom books. Job to the Song of Solomon are a series of writings from various periods that touch on various topics – often unrelated. For example, there is some evidence that Job is one of the oldest books in the bible, written before the first five books (the five books of Moses). I find the book of Job is one of the most interesting since it challenges the simplistic assumptions of the “Santa Claus Christians” as JP called them.
- Five books of the Major Prophets. These are called the major prophets because of their length, not the importance of the prophets. Their origins and compilations are still not settled although several of them can be reasonably clearly identified by contents and discoveries of the manuscripts. For example, Jeremiah is clearly written during the time of the exile since he is trying to come to terms with the fall of the Jews. In Jeremiah, we see how he is redefining the relationship between God and the Jews as he compares the relationship to that of an unfaithful wife and rebellious children. The Jews had become pagan worshippers so God had punished them. The book developed over a long time, however, with different sections – and two main versions (a shorter Greek version and longer Hebrew one).
- Twelve books of the Minor Prophets. These are shorter books from various periods. I like the one by Hosea where he further explores the relationship between the God and Israel as one between himself and his unfaithful wife. In this case, however, he affirms God’s continued commitment to Israel in spite

of their betrayal, much as he continues to reconcile with his wife. It appears to have been written about the 8th century BCE when the Jews turned to worship gods like Baal and Asherah. Baal's father, but the way, was Dagon, according to some sources. The latter name was one inspiration for your mother's.

The New Testament: These are stories, letters, and documents addressing the life of Jesus and the first Century of early Christianity. They were written in Greek since it was the language of the conquerors from about 300 years before the birth of Jesus. They can be organized in the following way.

- The four gospels. These are four books about the life of Jesus. They were written by people who had never met him so depended on oral accounts by various people. If you look at a "bible concordance" you will see where they seem to be copying each other – and adding various embellishments and perspectives along the way. This has given bible scholars considerable material (and lots of puzzles) to work with when trying to understand both the life of Jesus and the events that followed.

The current assessment is that Mark's gospel was the earliest of the four – and the other three had access to his. The other possibility is that all four of them had access to material that has disappeared since then. Most scholars refer to these missing sections are the Q-sources (mostly Jesus' sayings) and the L-source (Luke material). One interesting possibility of a previous source is the "Gospel of Thomas". It was discovered in northern Egypt in the year when Fran was born (1945). It seems that it was writing of the Essenes – a Jewish sect that was different than the two major sects (Pharisees and Sadducees) of the time. It seems like a mixture of writings, but includes some that were attributed to Jesus. Many of them are found in the four gospels (mostly Mark) so it that is why some people think it might be the missing link to the other ones.

The gospels were written many years after Jesus died. The earliest estimates are about 40 years, but others estimate it to be about 70 years. Since the writers had never met Jesus, they had to rely on stories of other people. This would be like you getting stories about what happened around 1977. For example, this would be me telling you stories about what I was doing when I was 33 years old. It was the next year (1978) that we went to Cap-St-Ignace on my sabbatical. Daegan was 8 years old and JP was 5. But in Jesus' time there were no photos, written materials, copies, or emails. I know that in telling the stories of Cap-St-Ignace, Fran and I don't always agree – so I'm not surprised that the stories in the gospels are different.

The fun thing about the scholarship on the gospels is that by looking at the embellishments of each author we can learn a lot about the writers' perspectives and how they differ. For example, it looks like Matthew was mostly interested in the Jewish expectation that the Messiah would be a descendent of King David – so he includes a lot of information about his birth legacy. It is interesting because of the later invention of the Catholic church that Mary was a virgin! Luke's version is directed more to the interpretation of the stories. It seems he was a doctor (and companion of Paul). John's gospel is more abstract than the others. That's why people feel he had a Gnostic interpretation of events. The Gnostics had a more spiritualized view of God than the other gospel writers. This is apparent right from the start when he talks about the "Word" and "the light" with respect to God. It's also found throughout his book.

- The Acts of the Apostles (Acts): This is a book about the activities of the friends and family of Jesus just after he died. It seems it was written by the same person who wrote the gospel of Luke. There are plenty of interesting stories and issues discussed in this book. Two of the most interesting to me are the way in which James, the brother of Jesus, was struggling to find the right way to guide the early Christian community (sometimes in opposition to Peter) and the second were the debates and dilemma created between James and Paul regarding whether Gentiles (non-Jews) could be part of the

Christian community. It is interesting to compare the account in Acts with some of the discussion in Paul's letters. It appears that James and Paul eventually came to an agreement that Paul would concern himself with the Gentile Christians (so long as he regularly sent donations to the Christian community in Jerusalem) and James would serve the Jewish ones. They also decided that Gentiles did not have to become Jews (and undergo circumcision) before becoming part of the Christian community.

- Letters and epistles: These are a number of letters which Paul wrote to early Christian communities throughout Minor Asia. Since Paul was a Roman citizen he had special privileges so was able to travel relatively easily without being challenged. Many of the letters are clearly written by Paul, but there are several where the authorship is unclear – even where the authorship seems to be clear (e.g. John and Peter).
- Book of Revelations: This is a chapter identified as “apocalyptic” (dealing with the end of the world) – the only one in the bible. It is also highly metaphoric, obscure, and extravagant – giving plenty of material for alternate interpretations. There was plenty of controversy about whether it should be included so you will only find it in some versions of the bible. Some people think it is about predictions, but most scholars feel it is a combination of material prepared for seven Christian communities. The author identifies himself as a Jewish Christian and the book is full of allusions (mostly to the Old Testament). The current view is that it was written in the context of a conflict within the Asia Minor community about whether to engage with the non-Christian community or not. This is an issue that was a big one and can even be found in some churches today.

As you can see, there are a lot of uncertainties about the origins, transformations, and meanings of the bible. Once I found out about the value of looking at the social context of these writings I became very interested in studying them in more detail – and enrolled in a Religious Studies major. I found this to be very interesting and informative since it included courses based on archaeology, exegesis (detailed analysis of texts), and hermeneutics (interpretation of texts). Now I use the following types of questions to guide me when I am faced with a particular biblical-related text. Answering them can be difficult (and sometimes incomplete) but I have always found the attempt to be informative and interesting.

1. When and where was the earliest copy of the document discovered?
2. Who wrote it?
3. Why did they write it?
4. To which group was it directed?
5. To what other documents is it related and what do these other documents imply about our interpretations?
6. Who decided it should be part of the canon or excluded from it – and why?

I hope you find this useful or interesting. I will be happy to discuss more details of any part of it. For me, this is what Bible Study is all about.

Love,
Bill