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THE BIBLE

A Very Short Introduction

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Chapter 3

The making of the Bible

The many names of the Bible

So far I have been speaking fairly freely about ‘the Bible’, without asking what might be meant by that expression. The word itself is derived from the Greek *biblia*, which is simply the plural form of *biblion*, book. The singularity of the expression ‘the Bible’ conceals a sense of plurality in its etymological roots. The Bible is a collection of books. Which books and why?

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the Bible as follows: ‘the Christian scriptures, consisting of the Old and New Testaments; the Jewish scriptures, consisting of the Torah or Law, the Prophets, and the Hagiographa or Writings’. This reflects the history of the term, which starts out life as a specifically Christian term and then passes into wider usage; and it indicates the striking difference in content which different books known as the Bible may hold.

First, a word about nomenclature. These collections of books have not always been known as the Bible. Jewish sacred writings have had many names. The most common are ‘scripture’, ‘the scriptures’, ‘the sacred scriptures’, ‘the books’, ‘the 24 books’, ‘the Law, the Prophets and the Writings’, ‘Tanak’ (an acronym based on the initial Hebrew letters of the words for the different sections of scripture—Torah, Nebi’im, Ketubim), and ‘mikra’ (literally, ‘what is read [aloud]’). The last two were established by the Middle Ages. Names such as

‘the Jewish Bible’ and ‘the Hebrew Bible’ are much more recent, though their precise origin is difficult to pin down. They have quite recently become the subject of considerable attention in departments of religious studies, where titles like ‘the chair of Old Testament’ seem inappropriate in a multicultural or multifaith context.

Christian usage has its roots in these Jewish names. In the New Testament writings we find references to ‘scripture’ and ‘the scriptures’, where the singular refers either to particular passages (sometimes ‘this scripture’, e.g. Mark 12:10) or to scripture as a whole (e.g. Romans 4:3). This latter use is probably derived from the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, known as the Septuagint. Here Hebrew expressions like ‘by the word of YHWH’ are translated ‘by the word of God in scripture’ (e.g. 1 Chronicles 15:15). This usage is sustained in the subsequent tradition, and in Latin, as *sacra scriptura,* is standard in the works of Thomas Aquinas in the Middle Ages. It remains a favoured way of referring to the Bible within Roman Catholic theological circles.

Sometimes in the New Testament, the Greek *biblion* (book) is used for the book of the Law (Galatians 3:10; Hebrews 9:19): here the writers again follow the usage of the Septuagint. However, other 1st-century Jewish writers in Greek, notably Josephus and Philo, predominantly use the plural *biblia*. This usage becomes standard in church circles from the later 4th century. Then in the Middle Ages the Latin borrowed word *biblia* comes to be treated as a singular expression which is reflected in other European languages: *the bible, la bible, la biblia, die Bibel*, etc.

To summarize: the term Bible, referring to a collection of sacred texts, is first used for the Christian scriptures, in their different versions. Only later is it used of Jewish scriptures to distinguish the Hebrew from the Christian scriptures. Thus ‘the Bible’, in most recent usage, is ambiguous: it may refer either to the Jewish or the Christian Bibles, in their various forms.

Now we need to consider how these collections were made and how such collections varied. What kind of diversity has the process of collecting and fixing the scriptures of the different Jewish and Christian communities produced?

The making of the Jewish canon: the Hebrew Bible and its Greek version

The process of collecting and fixing the scriptures of a particular community is often referred to as the canonization of scripture. The Greek word *kanon* means rod or reed, and, by extension, rule or measure. To create a canon of sacred writings is to create a collection which will be binding for the community for which it is intended. The process is complex and for both Jewish and Christian scriptures complicated by the fact that they were soon being produced in different languages. Collection and translation were closely connected. We will look first at the formation of the Hebrew Bible and then at its Greek version, the Septuagint.

The formation of the Hebrew Bible

As we have already seen, the writings which together form the Hebrew Bible were composed over a long period, some 900 years. Their collection together as authoritative books for their communities was also a lengthy process. Simplifying, we may say that the earlier books of the Bible were fixed first: the books of the Law and the books which record the story of Israel's entry into the Land and its subsequent history. Next came the prophetic books; and finally what were known as the 'writings': psalms, songs, proverbs, and more meditative (and sometimes apparently sceptical) writings. The Law was probably canonized around 400 BCE and the Prophets around 200 BCE. It is much less clear when the final section, the Writings, was fixed.

This impression of the relative fixity of the first two sections, the Law and the Prophets, and the considerable fluidity of the third is confirmed by the biblical manuscripts found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. Here we have the contents (often in a very fragmentary state) of the library of a 1st-century Jewish sect. It contains at least parts of all the books currently contained in the Hebrew Bible, except the book of Esther. There was therefore already a considerable consensus about which books should be included in the Jewish sacred scriptures. Other features however suggest a significant measure of fluidity at this period. The copies of the Psalms found at Qumran contain significant variations from the later canonical versions: thirty-five we might expect are missing, including Psalm 110, and there are a considerable number of 'additions'. The library, alongside writings specific to the community itself, also contained a number of writings not in the present Hebrew Bible but which are in the Septuagint. Some (e.g. the book of Jubilees, a retelling of the Genesis narrative, with theological ideas close to some of those found in the sect's own writings) remain outside the canons of either the Jewish or the Christian communities. Jubilees is however found in the Ethiopian canon.

It looks, then, as if the final shape of the Hebrew Bible emerged some time after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE. How then did the process of canonization work? Who, in the absence of the Temple priesthood, had authority to proclaim works canonical? Was it the group of Pharisees who, according to tradition, gathered around Johanan ben Zakkai at Jamnia (Yavneh)? Many now doubt that this grouping would have had the kind of authority required to command recognition throughout Jewish communities in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. More likely, the process was gradual. Communities came to recognize the value of some writings and the dangers of others. Those containing fierier visions of cosmic battles and the overthrow of Jewish enemies would have been regarded with caution in the light of the painful experiences of defeat at the hands of the Romans, both in the Jewish War (66–73), and in the Bar Kochba revolt (132–5). The book of Enoch, found in the Qumran library, was excluded, while others, like the book of Daniel,

were retained, possibly because they had gained wider currency before the wars. Probably there was no firmly agreed canon until well into the 2nd century CE.

Nor is this the end of the story. The text of the canonical writings at this point was written in unpointed Hebrew (and, in a few parts, Aramaic). Let me explain. The Hebrew alphabet is made up of twenty-four consonants (though some of them can be pressed into service as vowels). Words are thus represented by clusters of consonants. It was not until the development of Greek that an alphabet was devised which contained vowels pure and simple. This clearly meant that it was possible to disagree about the way in which a cluster of consonants should be read. Not only might there be different ways of supplying the 'missing' vowels, it would also be possible when copying manuscripts to regroup the consonants to form different clusters and therefore quite different words. This leaves a good deal of room for scribal error. From the 6th century CE, these ambiguities were addressed by the Masoretes, scholars who created a system of adding points to the consonantal text to represent the vowels which should be supplied.

The Greek translation: the Septuagint

From the late 4th century BCE, after Alexander's successful campaigns, Greek became the principal means of communication for much of the world inhabited by Jews. Jewish communities lived all across the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Many Jews grew up in Greek-speaking cities like Alexandria and went to Greek schools. Many no longer spoke Hebrew. From the middle of the 3rd century BCE translations into Greek began to be made of the Pentateuch, with the other books following over a period of centuries. That is to say, the process of translation into Greek occurred at the same time as the canon of the Hebrew Bible was being fixed.

The Greek translation is generally referred to as the Septuagint. This derives from the Latin *septuaginta*, meaning seventy. The Epistle of

Aristeas (mid-2nd century BCE) relates that seventy-two elders translated the Pentateuch into Greek at the request of a King Ptolemy of Egypt. They were so well looked after and so industrious that they completed the task in seventy-two days. Although this story is generally regarded as legendary, the term has stuck, even in scholarly circles. The work is often referred to by the Roman numerals LXX.

There are a number of intriguing features about this parallel process of translation and canonization. In the first place, there are substantial differences between the Hebrew and Greek versions of particular books, notably of Jeremiah, which is an eighth shorter in the Greek. (Hebrew texts of Jeremiah found at Qumran are closer to the Greek than to the canonical Hebrew text.) Secondly, there are substantial differences in the number of books included, both between different versions of the Septuagint and between the Septuagint and the Hebrew Bible. Generally speaking, 1 Esdras, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, Judith, Tobit, Baruch, the Letter of Jeremiah, 1–4 Maccabees, and the Psalms of Solomon are not found in the Hebrew Bible but are included in the Septuagint. Thirdly, there are variations in order. The threefold division of the Hebrew Bible is abandoned in the Septuagint. It appears that there was no clear division made between the Pentateuch and the rest of the historical books. Thereafter there is little agreement in the order of the books: some manuscripts place the psalms and wisdom literature before the prophets (as in Protestant Bibles); others reverse this order. In some versions, the book of Daniel is included among the major prophets; in others it is among the minor ones.

The Christian Old Testament

While the Septuagint started life as a translation for Jews living in the Diaspora, it was subsequently taken up by the Christian community as the medium through which the Old Testament (as it came to be called) was known in the Church. Thus from the start the Christian Bible included more books than the equivalent Hebrew collections.

The language of the Septuagint influenced many of the writers of the New Testament. Not until St Jerome translated the Christian Bible into Latin in the late 4th/early 5th century was the standing of the Septuagint questioned. Jerome used an early form of the text of our present Hebrew Bible and went to considerable lengths to learn Hebrew. His translation introduced a strong element of stability into the text of the Christian Old Testament in its official Latin form, known as the Vulgate.

However, the history of the Christian Old Testament does not stop here. The translation of the Bible into Latin marks the beginning of a parting of the ways between Western Latin-speaking Christianity and Eastern Christianity, which spoke Greek, Syriac, Coptic, Ethiopic, and other languages. The Bibles of the Eastern Churches vary considerably: the Ethiopic Orthodox canon includes eighty-one books and contains many apocalyptic texts, such as were found at Qumran and subsequently excluded from the Jewish canon. As a general rule, one can say that the Orthodox Churches follow the Septuagint in including more books in their Old Testaments than are in the Jewish canon.

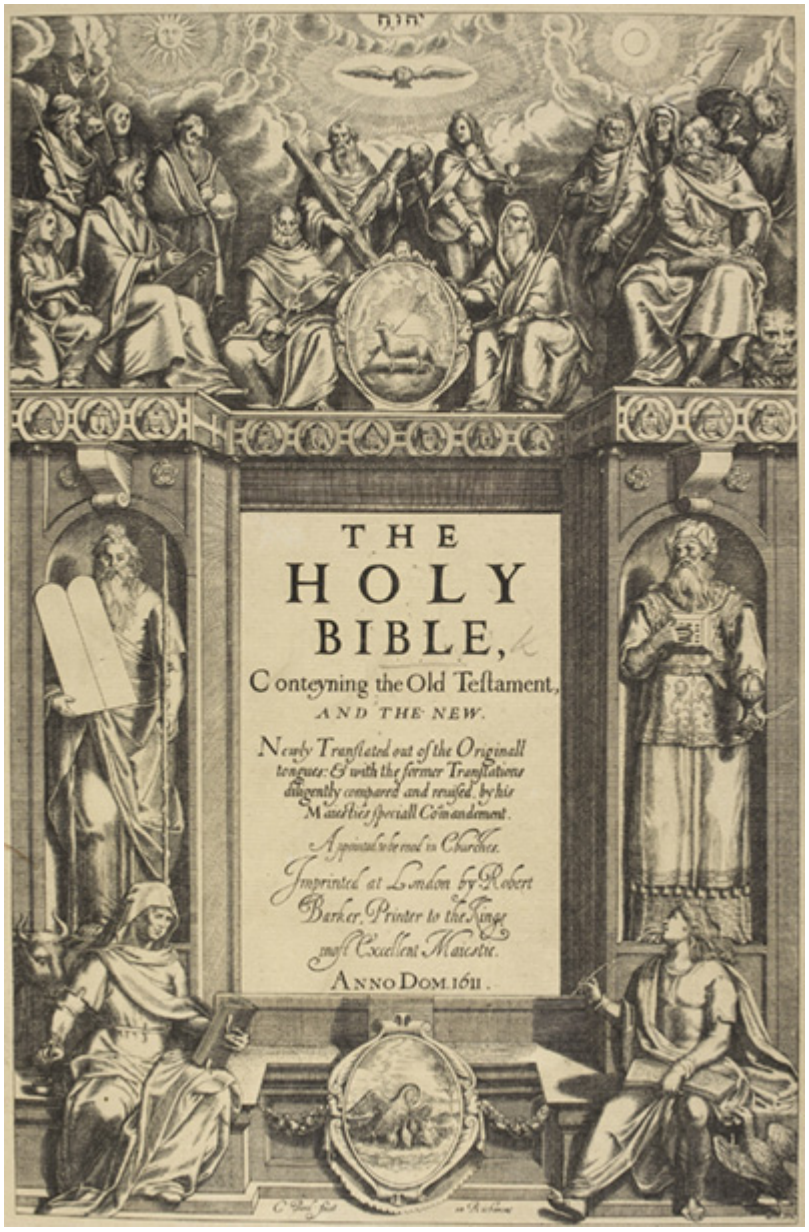
The same was true of the West until the time of the Reformation, when there was a renewal of interest in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament. In this they followed Jerome who, as the translators of the Authorized or King James Version put it, translated ‘out of the very fountains themselves’, that is to say, the Hebrew text. Allied with this goes a much greater respect for the books of the Hebrew Bible than for those found only in the Septuagint. These books are clearly separated from the books of the Old and New Testaments and referred to as ‘The books called Apocrypha’. The expression ‘apocrypha’, a plural noun from the Greek adjective meaning ‘hidden’ or ‘obscure’, was introduced by the German Reformer Carlstadt in 1520, with the implication that these books were reserved for the discerning. The Reformers regarded them with suspicion because the Second Book of Maccabees included prayers for the dead (2 Maccabees 12:43–4), a Catholic practice they rejected. This mistrust is reflected in the lectionaries in the Anglican Book of Common

Prayer, where only rarely are passages to be publicly read from the Apocrypha, and then mostly from Ecclesiasticus (ben Sirach) or Baruch or the Wisdom of Solomon. The Roman Catholic Church, by contrast, reaffirmed the authority of these books, referring to them as ‘deutero-canonical’, that is, secondarily canonical. In a further twist to the story, from the 1820s onwards it became a widespread practice among (Protestant) Bible societies to print Bibles without the Apocrypha at all. More recent ecumenical editions of the Bible, like the Common Bible, have restored the deutero-canonical books.

The Christian New Testament

The process of the formation of the Christian canon of the New Testament (i.e. of writings which have a specifically Christian origin) is not all that dissimilar from that by which the Hebrew scriptures came to be canonized.

In the early days of Christianity, there were of course no scriptures written by Christians. ‘Scripture’ for the early Christians was what they would subsequently come to call the Old Testament. Nor is it likely that the first Christian writings were composed as scripture. Once, however, Christian writings began to be seen as scripture themselves, they needed to be distinguished from the older canonical writings. The terms Old Testament and New Testament were introduced during the 2nd century. Originally they referred respectively to the covenants which God had made with the people of Israel through Moses and with the Church through Jesus. As applied to Christian writings, the name indicated that these were books belonging to the old or new covenant, not that the books themselves were the covenants. Later of course the terms came to refer to the books themselves, as on the title page of the King James Bible: ‘The Holy Bible conteyning the Old Testament, and the New’ (see Figure 1).



1. **Title page from King James Bible.**

How did a selection of early Christian writings come to be recognized as authoritative for the Church? The purposes of the books chosen are varied: Paul's letters were occasional communications to churches around the Mediterranean (or exceptionally to an individual, Philemon), addressing specific matters of belief and practice. They were in some ways a substitute for his own presence, offering advice, exhortation, argument, admonition, scolding. They

were an exercise of authority on Paul's part and were probably intended to be read out at meetings of the congregation. From the start, they claimed apostolic authority and had a role in the worship of the communities to which they were addressed. Some of the other letters, notably the so-called Catholic epistles (James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1–3 John), may have been intended for wider circulation, as indeed was the book of Revelation, though this is strictly an apocalypse (an account of visions and revelations) rather than a letter.

It is rather more difficult to say what the purposes behind the writing of the Gospels were. Some have thought that they, like Paul's letters, were written to address particular issues within their own communities. Matthew's Gospel, it has been suggested, was written in the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple to legitimize the position of his Christian Jewish congregation in relation to the dominant Jewish group, the heirs to the Pharisaic tradition. Thus Jesus is presented as a teacher who fulfils the Law and the prophets (5:17) and the Pharisees are attacked as blind guides (15:14). On the other hand, we must not overlook the obvious, which is that the evangelists were principally writing down a record of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. They were recording for posterity, and importantly giving their own view of, the events on which their faith was centred. They would hardly have undertaken such a labour simply for a small congregation in one particular settlement. Certainly such works quickly gained a wider circulation, and there were soon more in circulation than the four which we now know from the New Testament.

As the number of Christian writings in circulation in the churches scattered around the Mediterranean grew, so it became necessary to draw up an agreed list of authoritative texts which could be appealed to in matters of teaching and practice. The evidence for this process is scattered and often indirect. Scholars examine the use of the various Christian books by theologians during the period from the 2nd to the 5th centuries, as well as ecclesiastical rulings on the authority or orthodoxy of particular books.

The first stage in the formation of the canon was the making of collections of Christian writings. Paul's letters were the earliest writings to be collected, some time at the beginning of the 2nd century. The earliest collection has ten letters (1 and 2 Corinthians, Romans, Ephesians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Galatians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon). Later versions add the so-called Pastoral Epistles: 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. Eventually the Epistle to the Hebrews (which, unlike the others, does not contain an opening address by Paul to the recipients) was also added. By the end of the 2nd century the collection enjoyed widespread respect and use among church leaders, despite (or because of?) the fact that it had been the main source of doctrine of one of the earliest 'heretics', Marcion.

The next collection to emerge was the fourfold Gospel. This was more contentious. The four canonical Gospels were probably all written by the end of the 1st century, but that was by no means the end of the writing of Gospels. This overproduction of good news caused problems for the ordinary reader, who could easily be confused by such diversity in fundamental matters of the faith. In 170 Tatian unsuccessfully sought to find a solution by composing a single narrative out of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, with some additional oral material. By the end of the 2nd century a 'fourfold gospel' had come to be accepted. It contained four books, each of which told 'the' gospel according to the perspective of the particular evangelist. Such acceptance of diversity is remarkable, enshrining a political compromise at the heart of the Christian canon: no one contender, not even a hybrid, could command overwhelming support. Behind this compromise one might discern a wider perception that no one account could be adequate to express the one gospel to which all four witness. This understanding is reflected in the titles given to the Gospels: 'the Gospel according to Matthew', etc. The Gospels are to be seen as attempts, from their different standpoints, to express the mystery of what has been revealed to the Church.

While these two collections were fixed by the end of the 2nd century, there was less agreement about the contents of the third major

section which would be included in the New Testament canon: the Catholic epistles. These were letters which were held to have been written to all the churches, rather than to a particular congregation. Generally, though not universally, 1 Peter and 1 John were accepted as canonical in the 2nd and 3rd centuries. Other writings took longer to be accepted: James, 2 Peter (a late work), 2 and 3 John (very polemical writings, *inter alia* forbidding believers even to greet those who are considered deviant to the group), and Jude had much less support. 2 and 3 John were still rejected in parts of the East as late as the 6th century.

It appears then that the process of acceptance of Christian writings by the churches was a gradual one, closely connected with the formation of such collections. In the 4th century a number of lists of canonical writings were made, which in differing measure contain much of what is in the present canon and a certain amount that is not. There are also significant variations, especially in regard to 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Hebrews, Jude, and Revelation, which are omitted from some lists.

This long process was eventually concluded by a series of decisions of church councils, though none of these councils was a general (ecumenical) council of the Church. Even so there was still disagreement. The Council of Laodicaea (363) omitted Revelation from the list; the Councils of Hippo (393) and Carthage (397) gave the present list of twenty-seven books. As a general rule, books were included which were judged to have been written by one of the apostles, to have been addressed to the Church at large (meeting the criterion of catholicity) and from the early times, and which were believed to be orthodox. These criteria were, however, applied flexibly: there were doubts about the apostolic authorship of Hebrews; the Pauline epistles were not strictly catholic; Jude and 2 Peter had not enjoyed a long tradition of use. Revelation was questioned, partly because it had been popular among heretical groups (such as the Montanists), partly because there were those who claimed that its promises would be fulfilled in an earthly reign of Christ, a view easily associated with political unrest and subversion.

Its apostolic authorship was attacked and it was not accepted in the East until the 10th/11th centuries.

What's the use of a canon?

We have just had a very brief look at how different collections of books were made by different faith communities and had sacred and normative status conferred on them. We saw how, in both Jewish and Christian communities, this process was for the most part informal: different collections of books came to be recognized as sacred, authoritative, particularly appropriate for use in worship. To use the language of later Christian theology, the process of reception of the canon preceded that of formal definition. Moreover, this process of recognition was often a contentious one. It was not only a question of certain collections gradually gaining popularity. There were also books whose position within a collection, or within the final authorized collection, was contested. People wanted to fight not only for the inclusion but also for the exclusion of certain works. In the East the book of Revelation, with its millenarian fervour, was regarded with great suspicion. Such books were subversive and only to be treated with great caution and interpretative skill.

That is to say, the process of canonization of scripture is a process of conferring authority on some books and of refusing to confer authority on others. Sacred books carry a charge which has to be carefully controlled: they are a source of power and life for the communities which use them, but they are also potentially threatening. The communities which live by them may also grow apart by them. The same scriptures which have sustained a community through its history may suddenly be turned against it and cause painful and violent rifts.

What sort of authority is canonical authority as applied to writings? Moshe Halberthal, a Jewish philosopher teaching in Jerusalem, has helpfully distinguished different types of such authority: normative and formative. To recognize certain texts as canonical may be to

declare that they contain (or generate) norms which regulate the lives of the communities which accept them. They provide the means for the community to make decisions, to manage conflicts, and to give rulings in matters of belief and practice. Law codes are perhaps the best example of such texts. Declaring the Bible to be canonical is on this view to declare that it can all be read as a source of rulings on faith and practice for the Church. Practices which are described in the Bible may then be regarded as prescribing (or at the least as permitting) certain forms of action: for example, prayers for the dead (2 Maccabees 12:43–4) or the extermination of indigenous peoples (Joshua, Judges, 1 Samuel 15).

Canonical writings may also have a formative use. Literary classics which form the basis of educational curricula in certain countries may have no normative, legal force, but they still have a very powerful formative role in the communities which accept them. The classical literature of ancient Greece, ‘the Bible and Shakespeare’, Goethe and Schiller, and other classics have variously provided communities in Europe and North America with a common language and thought which enables them to discourse about and to make sense of their experience. Communities shaped by such a body of writings will tend to share certain basic beliefs about the world and the proper ways to behave in this world, which will both strongly bond them together and also provide the means of conducting fierce internal debates about these common beliefs.

In practice, the biblical scriptures have exercised such a formative role, every bit as much as being drawn on as a source of rules and norms for the life and faith of the community. They have provided ordinary believers—and indeed those with no particularly strong beliefs—with tools to make sense of their lives, which they have done in many different ways. For many this has not been the stuff of controversy. Liturgies, hymns, prayers all take up scriptural phrases, images and metaphors, narratives and shape believers’ attitudes, moods, and values.

On occasion these different uses of biblical language and imagery to make sense of experience have generated fierce debate and conflict. The Jews who lived at Qumran lived out of the same scriptures as other contemporary Jews; they shared with them basic beliefs about the Temple, the Land, the Law, and the covenant, but they disagreed strongly about the detailed interpretation of these beliefs. The Christian Reformers of the 16th century shared many of the same beliefs as the popes and priests of the Catholic Church. But they read scripture differently. When Luther finally grasped the sense of the expression 'the righteousness of God' on which he was to found the Reformation, he said that it was as if the gates of paradise had been opened to him: a whole new way of reading scripture, and therefore of conceiving the world and human action and behaviour, flowed from this breakthrough. This was then given powerful expression in popular tracts and in a flowering of hymnody, which shaped a whole new religious sensibility, very different from that of the medieval Church. The fact that 1st-century Jews and 16th-century Reformers and Catholics then appealed to scripture as normative, as a means of providing authoritative rulings in such debates, only aggravated the conflict.

The history of reception of the Bible gives ample examples of both these ways of reading a canonical text. There are sections of the Bible which easily lend themselves to a normative use, most obviously the law codes in Exodus and Leviticus and household codes in Colossians (3:18–4:1) and Ephesians (5:22–6:9), though attempting to put such rulings from a very different world into practice may cause many difficulties.

But such texts are the exception rather than the rule. Most texts do not easily lend themselves to such use. They are the product of a long process of composition and compilation. They are by no means always unambiguous. Many of the texts are metaphoric or poetic, intended to prompt people to re-envision their own world in their light, rather than simply to prescribe a way of looking at it. In all such cases the role of readers will not be simply to derive a set of rulings

from them but to read them formatively, in such a way as to illuminate and shape their own beliefs and experience of the world.

Halberthal makes a further important point about the inclusion of a text within one's canon of scripture: it sets limits on, in a sense changes, the meaning of the text. The presumption now must be that if it is an authoritative text for this community, it must support and in some sense be suitable for regulating its beliefs and practice. But what if it is apparently at odds with the community's beliefs and expectations? The Song of Songs is a wonderful, and wonderfully explicit, love song: but what can be made of such a poem as sacred scripture? The outlook of the book of Ecclesiastes is profoundly sceptical: what is to be made of a book which appears to deny outright that there is any connection between virtue and vice and rewards and punishments? In such cases interpretative strategies may need to be found to reduce the dissonances and to bring harmony into the discord of the sacred writings. Their meaning, as Halberthal somewhat provocatively puts it, is changed by virtue of their inclusion in the canon of scripture. If they are here, then they must have an appropriate meaning.

Similar points could be made about the change in sense which occurs when texts like the Gospels and the Pauline letters become part of the Christian canon. Rulings, say about what women should wear on their head in church (1 Corinthians 11:5–6), which strongly echo cultural beliefs of the time and were part of specific rulings to settle arguments within particular 1st-century Christian communities, come to assume the status of eternal divine law. The Gospels which had been regarded as the reminiscences of the apostles, whose principal function was to provide sources for Jesus's sayings and deeds, come to be regarded as authoritative interpretations of the meanings of those sayings and deeds.

In the second half of this book we will look more closely at a variety of readings of the biblical texts, mostly by believers, but also by those outside the various faith communities which have lived out of

the Bible. This will be in large measure a descriptive exercise: I hope that the sheer variety of readings associated with these texts will provoke a certain respect. For some, such respect will be coupled with affection, even love. For others, it may be more like the respect one accords to an unexploded bomb. It is not hard to see why such different reactions are both possible and appropriate.

Before we do that, however, we need to consider how this collection of books was given a variety of linguistic and physical forms, and distributed across the world.