

# *The Holy Bible and The Armenian Church*



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Our subject herein is *THE HOLY BIBLE*. In order to do justice to this topic, I must extend the scope to make comments about both The Holy Bible and the Armenian Church and the relationship between them.

To understand The Bible, one must first understand the Church. After all, it was the Church which gave birth to The Bible and not the other way around. Just as a psychologist, in studying a child's behavior, will examine the environment and the various circumstances in which that child developed, we, too, must review the conditions under which The Bible evolved, so that we can better comprehend the magnitude of this unique Book. In our quest to understand The Bible, we must also be able to study and understand: 1.) the Armenian Church's understanding of the Bible; 2.) the relationship of the Church, Tradition, and The Bible; and 3.) the history of the evolution of the Bible.

In Armenian, we refer to The Bible as *ASDVADZASHOONCH = BREATH OF GOD*. The Armenian Church believes that The Bible is God-inspired. In fact, even beyond that, as the word *ASDVADZASHOONCH* implies, the Armenian Church attaches great importance to The Bible and does not view it as just another book. However, in no wise does the Armenian Church believe that The Bible is the ultimate authority or spokesman for God in the Church. We cannot merely hold up The Bible and say this is it! There is a Holy Tradition which goes with it, and from which The Bible itself has come.

We see that almost daily new religious groups are springing up, especially in Southern California. It might, therefore, be easy to conclude that one can receive the power and authority to establish a church from The Bible. In fact, I'm sure that many of us have heard certain groups exclaim that if something is non-Biblical, it is not true or relevant or does not belong in the Church. Unfortunately, people with this view are operating under the common misconception that the Church is a creature of The Bible. We, as members of an ancient, traditional, orthodox Church must remember that God DID NOT give us The Bible. God gave us His Son, who in turn gave us the Church, which in its turn gave us The Holy Bible.

Let us here look at some relevant Scriptural passages in this regard: "*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*" (John 3:16) "*And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it.*" (Matthew 16:18) "*For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church.*" (Ephesians 5:29)

To better understand this process, we must now turn and examine the actual make-up of The Bible.

The Bible is made up of two major sections: *the Old Testament and the New Testament*. In the Christian Church, the Old Testament is seen through the New Testament. That is, for Christians, the New Testament is the fulfillment of God's promise which He made in the Old Testament. In the Armenian Church, we sing a special hymn on the Feast of the Holy Translators of the Bible called *VORK ZARTARETZIN*. The English translation of this hymn reads: "*O, you who masterfully bedecked the wisdom of the living letters to lead the flock of the New Israel . . .*" The key words here are *the New Israel*. For, in fact, the concept of Israel is from the Old Testament. It is the people to whom God entrusted His covenant. But the New Israel is the Christian Church, those who have accepted the New Covenant. Therefore, even in the Armenian Church, we understand the Old Testament in terms of the New Testament.

The next question we must ask is, "What is the New Testament or New Covenant?" Simply, it is the testimony about our Lord Jesus Christ. The New Testament consists of four Gospels, The Book of Acts, twenty-one letters and one apocalyptic book called The Revelation of St. John.

To better understand the New Testament, let's look at a time line, beginning with Pentecost (the Coming of the Holy Spirit). According to The Bible, the Church began on Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended upon the Apostles. (Acts 2:1 ff). The Apostles were the first Christian community, the first Christian Church, if you will. They had no Bible, as some view it. Jesus Christ never wrote anything. All the teachings were by word of mouth. So you see, first there was the Church and as yet there was no Bible. The Gospel or the Good News which they preached was that Christ had risen. For millenia, people had come and gone, but, yet, no one had ever conquered death. This was an earth-shaking experience in their lives. For them, the Apostles, their mission was to spread the Good News — CHRIST HAS RISEN. This was the first Gospel and it was transmitted orally. We need only read Acts 1:22 and 1 Corinthians 15:12ff to see this.

The first Christians felt that Christ's return would be imminent. That is to say, they felt that the Second Coming of Christ was right around the corner and they lived their lives accordingly. In this regard, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 is most illustrative.

As time went on, new Christian communities sprouted in different parts of the Roman Empire and outside of the Empire as well. Each of these communities had this understanding of an imminent end. As time went on, problems arose in the communities — daily problems. The communities were faced with questions of, “Should we obey the local authorities if Christ is due back any day?” Or, “Is it proper for us to marry, if Christ will be returning soon?” Or, “What will happen to all those who die before Christ returns?” These are all legitimate questions for a group of people who were harboring the notion of the imminent end.

Because of these problems, the Apostles, now scattered throughout the world, wrote responses to the communities, giving specific instructions on how to conduct their lives until Christ returned. Among the most popular letters were those of the Apostle, St. Paul. The books in the New Testament which follow the Gospels are nothing more than the letters St. Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, Corinth, Thessalonica, Ephesus, and so on. The first of these letters was written in the 40's A.D. and biblical scholars feel that this was 1 Thessalonians. So we see that up to this point there still is no Bible.

However, there is a Church with its worship services, which usually included partaking of the Holy Eucharist, reading psalms or prophetic literature of the Old Testament, and prayer. These letters which they received became the first books of what we today call The Bible, but there was no such book for them. Also, keep in mind that these letters or books were written for the sole use of the Church.

As more time went on, and, in the Church's understanding, Christ had not yet returned, further problems developed. For one, all the eyewitnesses to Christ's life on earth were slowly dying off. Who would remain to carry-on the stories of Christ's life? Furthermore, the communities and Churches were asking about the other facets of Christ's life, i.e. His birth, His upbringing, whether or not He was baptized, and so forth. For this reason, the Gospels were written.

The Gospels are the narrative account of our Lord's life. Again, the point has to be made that they were written for the sole use of the Christian Church. The Church demanded it, and, therefore, they were produced. The Synoptic Gospels, that is the Gospels according to St. Matthew, St. Mark, and St. Luke, including the Book of Acts, were written between 60 and 80 A.D. The Gospel according to St. John was written sometime later. Now, although these books had been written, they had not been put into the form of The Bible, as yet.

Toward the end of the second century A.D., there were all sorts of books in existence in the Christian communities. For example, there was the *Gospel of Thomas*, or, as the author called his book, *The Secret Words Which Jesus the Living Spoke and Jude Thomas Wrote Down*. This book is a compilation of 118 different sayings attributed to Jesus. It might be thought of as a more complete Sermon on the Mount. Many of the passages in this book are also found in the Gospels of St. Matthew and St. Luke.

There was also a book called *The Gospel of the Infancy of Jesus Christ*. It is one of the most fascinating books of the New Testament Apocrypha or *Hidden Books*. It was received by the Gnostics in the second century. This book is a compilation of stories relating to the young Jesus. Many of these stories seem to be derived from events and occurrences in the canonical Gospels. One story relates how Jesus, while still in the cradle, looks up at his mother and says, “Mary, I am the Son of God.” Another story is generated from the account of the anointing of Jesus by Mary Magdalene. The story has it that an old lady kept Jesus's navel string in an alabaster box of old oil of spikenard. It was out of this box that Mary took the oil to anoint Jesus. Still another story relates how Jesus and some other boys were molding clay figures of animals. Upon Jesus's command, the clay figures began to walk and fly. The entire book is filled with miraculous stories of this nature.

Some other books of this genre included, *The Gospel of Nicodemus*, *The Gospel of Peter*, *the Epistle of Jesus Christ and Abgarus the King of Edessa*.

So, the early Church Fathers had before them many books relating in some fashion or form to the Lord Jesus Christ. After studying these books and sifting through their content and deciding which ones were authentic and which were distortions of the truth or exaggerations of the truth or even which were representative of heretical views, the Church Fathers decided which books would be officially approved for use in the Church.

It was the Church Fathers who decided what was to be considered THE BIBLE. These books were considered to be *scriptural canon*. In canon 85 of the Canons of the Holy and Renowned Apostles there is a list of all the books which are to be considered sacred and to be read in the Church. All of the books that are in The Bible as we know it today are in this list, except the Book of Revelation. It wasn't until 419 A.D., at the Holy Regional Council held in Carthage that the Book of Revelation was accepted as being canonical.

Meanwhile, during this same time, during the 5th century A.D., a monumental task was underway in Armenia. It had been undertaken by Sts. Sahag and Mesrob. At that time in the Armenian churches, The Bible was used. However, it was read in Greek. The Greek Septuagint, which means *work of the 70*, was read in the Armenian Church until the 5th century, when Sts. Sahag and Mesrob embarked upon the task of translating the Bible into Armenian. St. Mesrob found the necessary tool for doing this when he invented the Armenian alphabet in 404 A.D. Along with their disciples, St. Sahag and St. Mesrob translated the Greek Septuagint into Armenian over a period of 30 years. In 434 A.D., their labors came to an end. Many scholars today refer to their Armenian translation of the Bible as the *QUEEN OF TRANSLATIONS* because of its accuracy and style of perfection.

A major change in the Bible came at the time of the Protestant Reformation, when Martin Luther, in 1534, published his German Bible which had a number of books separated from the Bible. These books, which Luther excluded on his own, he referred to as the *APOCRYPHA*. As a preface to the Apocrypha, Luther wrote, "*Apocrypha, that is, books which are not held equal to the sacred Scriptures, and nevertheless are useful and good to read.*"

Of course, all the Eastern Orthodox Churches, as well as the Roman Catholic Church, continued to regard these books as canonical. This, of course, also includes the Armenian Church.

Among those books that were separated is the Book of Maccabees, where we see the Jews praying over the dead and expounding on life after death. This can be compared with the Armenian Church's *Hokehankist = Requiem Service*.

Another section which was separated is from the 3rd chapter of the Book of Daniel, which has a section known as *THE SONG OF THE THREE YOUTHS*. This section is read in the Armenian Church on Easter Eve and the Eve of Theophany. In this section, we see the first miracle of Christ as He descended into the fiery furnace to save the three young men.

In any case, my point in mentioning these books is to make you aware that these books are a part of our Tradition and, unfortunately, are sometimes overlooked.

We now come to today. We have a finished copy of The Bible, all nicely printed and available virtually anywhere. What is the role and use of The Bible for us, as members of the Armenian Church? Where does the Bible fit-in, so to speak, in the life of the Armenian Church?

Many times, and I'm sure that many of you are aware of it, our Armenian Church is criticized for not stressing The Bible, or for not emphasizing The Bible. When we hear these complaints, we must always keep in mind the point which I am here trying to make - *The Bible is the product of the Church!* Beyond a doubt, our Armenian Church is one of the most biblical Churches. Every part of our liturgies, hymns, and services can be paralleled with some portion of The Bible. However, The Bible is not the only thing our Church has to offer, we have Holy Tradition. These are practices of the Church which were established long before the Bible was compiled. Furthermore, not everything was written in The Bible. As St. John writes in his Gospel, *Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.*" (John 20:30-31) What were those other signs?

Moreover, St. Paul writes, "*So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter.*" (2 Thessalonians 2:15)

So, in other words, there was an oral tradition which was equally as valid as the written one. And where is this Tradition? It is in the same place as The Bible — in the Church!

If we open the Armenian Church lectionary for the Feast of the Holy Translators, we find it lists the reading from the Gospel of St. Matthew 7:6, which reads, "*Do not give dogs what is holy, do not throw your pearls before swine; they will only trample on them and turn and tear you to pieces.*"

Perhaps our forefathers had a reason for instructing us with this passage, and, I suspect, a very good reason. When we speak of The Bible in the Armenian Church, we speak of the *ASDVADZASHOONCH = THE BREATH OF GOD*. Our forefathers, realizing this, felt The Bible was only to be kept within the confines of the Church. We must remember that the accessibility of a Bible to us is a phenomena of only the past few centuries, from the time of the printing press.

The early Church Fathers, I suspect, did not intend The Bible, the Breath of God, to be an evangelical or inspirational tool outside the Church. Even today, in our churches, The Bible, especially the Gospels, is considered sacred. Be it Deacon or Priest, whoever handles The Bible in the Church, never directly touches the Holy Book, but uses a cloth to hold it.

Because the Church produced The Bible, the Church, ultimately, is the entity which gives authority to The Bible. And, in the same light, only in the Church can The Bible be interpreted with authority.

As I stated earlier, The Bible is not something which God gave directly to us. No, it is the compilation of the writings and oral traditions of year upon year, century upon century. We, as the living Armenian Church today, should never forget that in terms of historical reality, our Church, along with its rich Tradition existed long before the Bible was compiled. Please do not misunderstand me, I am not trying to diminish the importance or the role of The Holy Bible in the Church.

Yes, we do believe it to be inspired by God. We even make note of this every Sunday when in the Creed we recite, "*We believe also in the Holy Spirit, the uncreate and the perfect; who spake in the law and in the prophets and in the Gospels.*" But, we must keep it in perspective and view it in accordance with and in acknowledgement of the Holy Tradition of the Church.

In closing, I reiterate that The Bible is a part of the Holy Tradition of the Church. Although The Bible holds a certain supremacy in this Holy Tradition, we must remember that if we are to speak about The Bible, we must also speak about liturgical and sacramental life, the ecumenical councils, the writings of the Church Fathers, the lives of the saints, canon law, music, and architecture.

All of these are sources of faith and very much a part of Holy Tradition. As the living Armenian Church today, we must not only share in The Bible, but in all the Holy Tradition of the Armenian Church and be prepared to pass it on to future generations.

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