

## OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

### The Development of Scripture

The Bible has not always existed as we find it today. The Hebrew people had no official Scripture as they made the Exodus journey. The account of the Ten Commandments being placed on stone tablets gives us the first reference to "official" Scripture.

The books which make up our Old Testament were the Bible to early Christians for many years. It literally took centuries for Christians to agree on which books should be part of the **canon**. The word **canon** comes from an ancient word that means "reed." This term came to mean a standard for the measurement of other things. Thus the Biblical canon includes books that have been designated as the standard for understanding God's will. The determination of which books should become canonical--part of the Bible--was a slow process involving many years and many persons.

The section called **When Did It Happen?** should help you put in perspective the number of years which passed between the Exodus journey and the writing of Paul's letters. Remember that countries like Canada and the United States have had short histories compared with the centuries over which Scripture was composed. It took many centuries after the writing of all the Biblical books for them to be widely distributed and accepted as part of the Biblical canon.

### The Importance of Oral Tradition

It is impossible to understand the development of Scripture without recognizing the importance of oral tradition. In our own time, books are relatively inexpensive and widely available. While most of us wish books were cheaper, the purchase of a Bible is not a major investment for a Canadian or United States family.

The Biblical world was different. For many years, materials had to be written on wood, metal, stone or leather. The development of papyrus (writing surfaces made from a plant) in Egypt helped, but this material was still expensive.

Even alphabets were relatively slow in development. Since writing was unusual and expensive, written languages were slow in formation. The Sumerian people had some written language involving pictures (or pictographs) perhaps as early as 3500 B.C., but it was 1650 B.C. before the Canaanite alphabet was developed. We believe that the Hebrews adopted the Canaanite alphabet.

Thus many stories and teachings were transmitted by oral tradition. Stories were passed from person to person, group to group, and generation to generation by skilled speakers. Accurate memory was an important gift, and we believe accounts were preserved with high accuracy. One helpful analogy would be the stories which parents tell their children in our own time. Children notice the change of even a single word and are quick to correct their parents. The biblical accounts, however, come from the oral traditions of material that the Hebrews considered sacred. Thus accurate preservation of the narratives was extremely important.

Many of the teachings of Jesus would also have been preserved in oral tradition before being preserved in the Gospels. Again, the importance of those words resulted in great care in their transmission. As Christians, we further believe that God guided and directed the whole process of oral tradition.

The first five and possibly even the first six books of the Old Testament have some common roots. Although the first five books were for many years attributed to Moses, most biblical scholars now believe that the words were not written down by Moses. Probably the accounts of several different sources were carefully woven together to create the Pentateuch (first five books) or the Hexateuch

(first six books) as we now know them. Some material which seems contradictory to us today was apparently preserved because it was felt too valuable to change (Genesis, for example, contains two creation stories).

Most of the Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew. Since most of us are not familiar with that language, we can read and understand the Old Testament only by using translations.

There are several Old Testament names for God. Before Moses and the Exodus, God was referred to as *EI*, which was a general word used for other gods as well. Moses introduced the name *Yahweh* (from which our term *Jehovah* is derived). This word means "he causes to be" or "I am who I am."

The ancient Hebrews believed that the name of God was so sacred that people should not say it aloud. For this reason, they combined the consonants in the term *Yahweh* (YHWH) with the vowels in the word *Adonai* (which means "my Lord") and produced a word that could not be pronounced. Biblical scholars call the original form of this word (YHWH) the *Tetragrammaton* ("Four Letters"--from the Greek word *tetra*, which means "four," and the Greek word *grammaton*, which means "letter").

### Dead Sea Scrolls

In the second century B.C., a small group of people formed a community near the Dead Sea. The place was called *Qumran*, and the people were often referred to as *Essenes*. These people were dissatisfied with the religious practices of the Jews and felt that too many Greek practices were being accepted. Consequently, the *Essenes* formed their own worship traditions and identity.

This community was apparently destroyed in A.D. 68 by the Romans. The *Essenes* had carefully hidden many Biblical manuscripts, however. These manuscripts represent our oldest Biblical sources. Not all the manuscripts have been translated yet, since they were only discovered in the 1940's. Translations so far have basically substantiated the value of our Biblical texts.

### WHEN DID IT HAPPEN?

Dating Old and New Testament events is always a difficult matter. Even the best Biblical scholars have different opinions on some matters. It is almost impossible to assign dates to events earlier than the time of Abraham. The following dates are, for the most part, not exact; but they should be of some help to you in placing Biblical events.

1900 B.C.	Abraham goes to South Palestine.
1650 B.C.	Canaanites invent an alphabet.
1250 B.C.	Moses leads the Exodus.
1225 B.C.	Joshua leads the Hebrew tribes in the destruction of several Canaanite cities.
1020 B.C.	Saul unites the Israelite tribes and is the first Israelite king.
1009/8 B.C.	Saul dies. David is king.
970/69 B.C.	David dies. Solomon is king.
965 B.C.	Temple construction begins.

- 931/30 B.C. Rehoboam succeeds Solomon. Northern tribes secede and choose Jeroboam.
- 740/39 B.C. Isaiah called as a prophet.
- 628/27 B.C. Jeremiah called as a prophet.
- 586 B.C. Destruction of Jerusalem and the temple beings. Many are exiled.
- 334 B.C. Alexander the Great begins to conquer the Persian empire. He gains control.
- 250 B.C. Greek translation of the Old Testament begins. This was to continue for two centuries and was known as the "Septuagint."
- 142 B.C. Judea becomes independent.
- 63 B.C. Pompey captures Jerusalem. Palestine comes under Roman rule.
- 48 B.C. Julius Caesar becomes absolute Roman ruler.
- 40 B.C. Decree of the Roman Senate makes Herod king of the Jews.
- 7 A.D. Jesus is born. The date is an approximation, but early calendar problems make it certain that Christ was not born until a few years after the change from B.C. to A.D.
- 28 A.D. John begins baptizing.
- 30 A.D. Jesus is crucified and resurrected.
- 33 A.D. Paul is converted.
- 55 A.D. Paul writes Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon while in prison.
- 57 A.D. Paul writes Romans from Corinth.
- 66 A.D. The Jews revolt against Rome.
- 68 A.D. Mark is written.
- 85 A.D. Mathew is written.
- 90 A.D. Luke and Acts are written.
- 92 A.D. Paul's letters are collected.
- 100 A.D. The Gospel of John is written.
- 110 A.D. The letters of John are written.
- 140-200 A.D. The New Testament canon began to take shape.
- 367 A.D. The first collection of the New Testament Scriptures as we know them today.