

The Christian Bible – the Old and New Testaments

The Old Testament

The earliest Christians, for the most part practicing Jews (“Jewish Christians”), took over the Hebrew Bible in the Greek version, the “Septuaginta”. This version contains several books or parts of books not contained in the Hebrew canon. The Hebrew Bible came to be known as the “Old Testament” to distinguish it from the “New Testament”. Since Luther, most Protestant versions follow the Hebrew canon.

The New Testament

The name “New Testament” signifies “New Covenant”, a term Jesus is said to have used at his Last Supper. The “New Testament” developed between 45 and ca. 140 CE. It contains, in the first place, testimonies to Jesus’ deeds and teaching, which, after his death, were transmitted, collected and written down by his early disciples. To these were added stories of the early church, epistles of the apostles and other pastoral and theological writings. Already in the 2nd Century there is evidence that such collections were in circulation in the Christian community.

The New Testament contains:

- Four narratives of Jesus’ teaching and ministry (**Gospels**; old English “good news”).
- An account of the apostles’ ministry (**Acts of the Apostles**).
- 21 letters written by or attributed to Paul and other apostles (**Epistles**)
- A prophetic work (**Apocalypse / Revelations**).

Jesus himself left no words in writing and took no measures to insure the faithful transmission of his words. The disciples and the early community handed on his words and deeds at first orally, each setting his own accents, selecting, interpreting and expanding the tradition. Only with time were these traditions committed to writing. The writers of the **gospels** gathered written and oral traditions, ordering them according to their own viewpoints, expanding them, and adapting them to each other. The **Acts of the Apostles**, the **Epistles of St. Paul** and the **other writings** relate little about Jesus’ life; instead they address themselves to contemporary pastoral and theological questions.

The Gospels

Mark, Matthew and Luke agree largely in their structuring and selection of information, often indeed in their wording, so that together they allow the construction of a “synoptic” survey of Jesus’ message, life, and significance, the corresponding texts being printed next to each other in parallel columns.

Matthew and Luke rely on Mark’s Gospel, one or more (?) independent collections of Jesus’ sayings (e.g. the postulated “Q”-Document, called after the German word for source: “Quelle”), and other sources peculiar to each author.

Mark's Gospel: originated around 70 AD, author unknown.

Luke's Gospel: originated 70–90, author unknown.

Matthew's Gospel: originated 80–90, author unknown.

John's Gospel: originated around 100 in the setting of a community with an elevated theology (Jesus as the Word of God existing before all ages) and cut off from the Jews (for this reason at times anti-Jewish).

Acts of the Apostles

A “continuation” of Luke's Gospel, presenting itself as the second part of a comprehensive historical work. In the second half of this book, the author makes use of pre-existing travel reports and other Pauline materials, but he probably did not himself accompany the apostle Paul on these journeys. Written between 80 and 100 AD.

Pauline Epistles

Letters written by the apostle Paul in the course of his missionary journeys either to local communities (Thessalonians 1 and 2, Corinthians 1 and 2, Galatians, Romans, Philippians, Colossians, Ephesians) or to individuals (Philemon, Timothy 1 and 2 and Titus – the latter three letters constituting the “Pastoral Epistles”). Written between 45 and 56 AD.

Epistle to the Hebrews and the “Catholic” Epistles

The Epistle to the Hebrews was often ascribed to St. Paul, but most likely it was written by an unknown author around 80/90 AD.

The seven “Catholic” Epistles are named after their purported apostolic authors rather than after their recipients. The term “catholic” is used in the sense of the Greek word for “general” or “universal”, implying that they are addressed to the whole Church. They arose between 90 and 110 AD.

Apocalypse / Revelations

This book contains a vision of history as a monumental drama marking the End of the World. It describes the final struggle between the Christian community and the pagan state, God's war against Satan from which Christ ultimately emerges as the victor and the end point of the history of salvation. It was written between 90 and 95 AD by an unknown prophet named John.