

“Lost and Found? A History of How the Bible Came To Be”
Joe Heikman // Wildwood Mennonite Church // Feb 4, 2018

2 Kings 22:3-13 (*Inclusive Bible* translation):

In the eighteenth year of his reign, Josiah the ruler sent his secretary, Shaphan ben-Azaliah ben-Meshullam, to the Temple of God... The high priest Hilkiah said to Shaphan the secretary, "I found the Book of the Law in the Temple of God." He gave it to Shaphan, who read it.... Then Shaphan the secretary went to the ruler, reporting to him, "Hilkiah the priest gave me a book." and Shaphan read from the book in the presence of the ruler. When the ruler heard the words of the Book of the Law, he tore his clothes...."God's great anger must be smouldering against us, for our ancestors did not obey the commands in this book."

I love that story. A bit of context: the King of Judah ordered a renovation project for the Temple in Jerusalem. And while they were working on restoring the building, someone found an old book, or more likely, a scroll. And it wasn't just any book, but *the* book, the “book of the Law,” the central text of their religion, the book that told them how to live in ways that would please God. Which apparently they'd been doing without for generations, so that when the King found out what was in the book, he freaked out. He was terrified of the wrath of God, because they and their ancestors had not been obeying the words of the book. And so in the chapter that follows, King Josiah launches into massive religious reforms based on that book, tearing down temples and slaughtering priests, because that's what this lost book of the Law told him to do.

So this is a story about a book, that someone “finds” and determines that it is important, and not just important but sacred. And this story has been written down because some decided it was important enough to write down and include in a book, the book of Kings. And someone else later decided that this book wasn't just important, but sacred, part of the Hebrew scriptures of the Jewish religion.

And all of this is in what we Christians call *the Old Testament*, “old” because it's different from the “new” testament story of Jesus, but still a “testament” because this book is essential to understand the story of Jesus, not just a story but a sacred story, part of the larger Word of God.

So what we just heard is a story about a book, inside a book with a story about that book, inside another book with a story about *that* book, which of course happens to have its own story about how it became a book. And now you've wandered into my story about that story. Still with me? :)

And here's the important part this morning: at each of those layers, there is someone or possibly a group of someones who decided that this story is worth telling, and not just worth telling, but sacred: part of the Word of God. And with each decision, each someone or someones brought their own perspective, their own bias, their own agenda that shaped how each of those stories was understood and passed on.

(And I haven't even mentioned the issues of translation and the hazards of unintentional human error through mistakes and typos. Yes, there are typos in the Bible, sometimes.)

In other words, this story is a communications nightmare of bias and complexity and creative license and human error.

"The Word of the Lord." (congregation responds: "Thanks Be to God.")

How is it possible that God is speaking in the middle of this jumble of complications? And what are the chances that we can actually hear God's voice and understand what God was saying back then, much less figure out what it might mean for us today in our particular contexts?

Today I'd *like* to tell you the story of "How the Bible Came to Be."

The technical word for it is the formation of the canon. C-a-n-o-n, it literally means "measuring stick," and it represents an official collection of something, usually writings. There are now 66 books in the Biblical canon, according to Protestant Christians, 39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament. The Catholic Bible includes 73 books, adding an extra 7 to their Old Testament canon.

So we non-Catholics would say that those seven books aren't official, while they may be interesting and useful, they're not sacred, not part of the canon of Scripture. And the Catholics would disagree. Most of us don't really know *why* that's the case, we just accept what has been handed to us. And that's okay. The point is that at some time, some people made a decision about what to include in the canon, what counts as scripture and what does not. And not everyone agreed, and so there are different versions and multiple streams of scripture and authority.

Those decisions around canon have been around from the beginning of the Bible. As Jews and Christians, we are "People of the Book"--but which ones? (Muslims have similar issues to wrestle with in their understanding of the Qur'an, as well.)

Mennonite Old Testament scholar [John W Miller](#) of Conrad Grebel University College saw this story of Josiah and the Lost Book of the Law as key part of that story of [how the Bible came to be](#). (Book review with summary here: [Keshet Journal of Messianic Judaism](#))

Stage One: A Faithful Monarchy (900 to 600 BCE)

Following the reigns of King David and King Solomon, for about three centuries the nations of Israel and Judah were ruled by direct, relatively independent, local monarchies. In that period, there were forty different kings between the two nations, with reigns ranging from as short as a month up to forty or fifty years.

And some of those kings followed the religion of YHWH, and many others followed other religions, the worship of idols and fertility gods, pantheons of other local tribes, etc. The biblical books describe this in black-and-white, as in Ahab was a bad king because he turned away from YHWH to worship Ba'al, and Josiah was a good king who turned back to YHWH and purged the land of idol worship.

That's the pattern, of a king or two leading Israel and Judah away from the One True God for a couple of generations, and then a good king or a prophet rises and calls the nation back to God. Until the next king falls away again, and so on.

Professor Miller says that back-and-forth religious conflicts of this period of Kings in Judah and Israel are where the first books of the bible were pulled together and formalized into a canon. Especially towards the end of this time period, during the reigns of Hezekiah and Josiah. Both Hezekiah and Josiah ruled for long periods, and they both solidified their power by enacting major religious reforms.

Miller says that as part of these reforms, the laws and traditions and stories of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings were gathered into a formal collection. Most of that probably wasn't as dramatic as finding a lost book in a dusty corner of the Temple library...but that's the general idea--finding, pulling out and highlighting various pieces of the existing tradition that can guide the way forward.

When you're reforming a nation, the authority of canon is really helpful: this is the official version of history, these are the rules, this is what it looks like to follow God.

And so they, and it's pretty fuzzy who "they" are, took the various resources of their culture, legends of prophets and judges, the stories of previous rulers, the rules of Temple practice, the laws that guided society. They took those and sorted and edited some, and set some aside, and pulled them together into a single, relatively unified collection of books that they would look to as authority. These were the legitimate rules, the stories that defined the nation and what it meant to be God's People.

And the basic message was clear: obey God, and God will bless the nation. Disobey, and you're on your own.

So that's the first stage of canon formation, the recognition of the books of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings. Incidentally, the book of Kings itself covers some of the events of that time period when it was included in the canon, so the work of writing and editing must have gone on even after this first canon was formed.

Stage Two: A Faithful People (500 to 300 BCE)

As you no doubt learned in Sunday School (right?!), after three hundred years of monarchy, Israel and Judah were both destroyed by foreign Empires, carried off into Exile. After a couple of generations in Exile, some of the Jews returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the Temple. But they were still a people without a king, politically subject to a much greater Empire. And so they had a whole

new set of questions about what it means to follow God, to be Jewish *after* the destruction of the nation.

If faithfulness does not mean that God will bless the kingdom, who are we? This is where stories like the blessing of Abraham become important--we are not a kingdom, but a blessed people, set apart by a sacred calling and a unique culture rather than a political nation. Or the story of Exodus, where faith is stronger than Empire, and obedience to God's Way of Life is more powerful than having a large army or great wealth.

And so, in this period, the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers were added to the canon. And over the next two-hundred-ish years, the rest of the Hebrew Bible was included as well. Those books present a much broader understanding of what it looks like to be the People of God, beyond the authority of the failed monarchy. Faithfulness also looks like the story of Ruth, the common refugee who became part of God's People not by blood but by grit and determination. It looks like Daniel, Shadrack, Meschak, and Abednigo, who laid down their power to instead trust in prayer. It looks like the practical wisdom of Proverbs, and the philosophical wisdom of Ecclesiastes. It looks like the beauty and agony of the Psalms, the fiery hope of the prophets, the simple obedience of Sabbath-keeping and food laws and holy days.

Again, some shadowy "they" are picking and choosing, collecting and setting aside, editing and adding, smoothing out some bits and letting others stand as they are.

So at this point, around 300 BCE, the Jewish canon is pretty much finished. There doesn't seem to be a formal date or event where this happened, but basically the 39 books we call the Old Testament, were in place, and the Hebrew Scriptures that Jesus referred to as "the Law and the Prophets" are much the same for us as they were for him. Interestingly, the order in which the Hebrew Scriptures are arranged is quite different from the way our modern Christian translations are arranged...but that's a fascinating rabbit trail for another time.

Stage Three: A New Expression of Faith (150 to 200 CE)

John Miller describes a third stage of the canon, when the writings of the Christian New Testament were added to the Hebrew Scriptures. Miller says this happened sometime around 150 to 200 CE.

Long story short, at that time [a quasi-Christian teacher named Marcion](#) came to prominence in the early church. Marcion believed that the God that Jesus talked about was different than the God of the Hebrew Scriptures, so Marcion made a total break with Judaism and wrote off the Hebrew Scriptures. In its place, Marcion pulled together his own collection of Scriptures: a part of the Gospel written by Luke, a handful of the letters of the Apostle Paul, and some of Marcion's own writings.

Forget that vengeful, violent God of the Jews, the God of Jesus is all love and forgiveness, and these new Scriptures tell the true message of God. Marcion was incredibly popular. Some estimates say that 40% of Christians in his day were Marcionites.

So if you're a leader in the relatively small Christian movement and someone comes on the scene with his own teachings about Jesus and his own version of Scripture, very different than yours, what do you do? It became pretty important at that point to respond with your own clarification of what you consider to be Scripture. And that's what happened, alternative lists of the New Testament canon were made and circulated. And because of Marcion's rejection of the Hebrew God and the Hebrew Scriptures, the response emphasized the continued authority of the Hebrew Scriptures and Jesus' connection to the Hebrew God.

These two versions of canon competed, and eventually support for Marcion died out and what we now call orthodox Christianity carried the day. If you're imagining formal church meetings and important decisions being made by bishops and popes, my seminary professors tell me it was much more organic than that. The church of the second and third centuries was much more of a network and a movement than an institution. So these decisions about the New Testament scriptures were made by usage--which writings did local church groups keep coming back to, which were shared and passed around, which were helpful and seemed true to the Spirit of Jesus?

There were criteria for determining authenticity, the most important being the requirement that writings accepted into the canon were tied somehow to the original Apostles (another way of de-legitimizing Marcion and similar teachers from injecting their own teachings). And when the Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity and made it the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, there were formal councils and such to determine canon. But mostly they were formalizing what had already been established by practice. The most significant thing that they did was to close the canon, so that future generations also accepted that particular set of books and nothing more was added.

So, like the Hebrew Scriptures, the New Testament canonizers pulled together the various pieces of text from pre-existing writings, edited a bit here, rejected a few pieces as unhelpful or redundant, arranged them in a particular order, and then presented them as a formal collection, diverse but unified in purpose and theme. Because that's what was needed at the time. Changing circumstances called for a fresh understanding of God and a fresh understanding of what it meant to be faithful, and a new collection of Scriptures were helpful in laying that foundation for God's People.

How are you doing? That's a lot of history. This sermon originated in the January meeting of the WMC book club. We were discussing a book by Rob Bell, [What is the Bible?](#) And someone asked the question about canonization, when were the various pieces collected and who decided which parts were in and which parts were out?

And I naively suggested that I would do some research, and come back on this Sunday with the story of "How the Bible Came to Be." I mean, that seems like something a good pastor should know, right? And I had bits and pieces of the story from my seminary classes, but I hadn't ever seen it pulled together into anything coherent, especially about the origins of the Old Testament canon. So that's what I promised to do.

And then I did a little research, and realized this was an impossible task. The reason that I hadn't learned much about this in seminary is that we really don't know much about the history of the canon.

Yes I did just tell you the history of the canon, how there were three stages and how they kind of flow together into this nice story of God's people pulling together Scripture resources according to their present situation.

But here's the thing, I'm not sure any of that is true. This was John W Miller's understanding, and he was a serious scholar who did the research to the best of his ability, complete with peer review and all the other modern academic technicalities. It's a believable picture, and I find it quite helpful.

But most of his peers disagree with him on a lot of this stuff. The [dates on the development of the Hebrew canon](#) vary by, oh, 500 years or so, give or take a couple of centuries. Some people say the five books of the Torah were already accepted as Scripture in the time of David and Solomon. Many scholars suggest that later books like Daniel and Esther weren't even written until two hundred years after Miller says the Hebrew canon was closed, and that it was not actually closed until the second century CE. Many people say the New Testament canon really was determined entirely by Roman councils, and theories abound about why books like the Gospel of Thomas were suppressed by the Roman church structures. Scenarios like that of *The Da Vinci Code* aren't that far removed from the realm of possibility.

So this is one story of How the Bible Came To Be, but it's far from *the* story. Some of this uncertainty is because scholars haven't looked all that much about how and why books were chosen for the canon--it's been easier and quite possibly more useful to research instead at questions of when and where individual books and writings originated were first written and how they were edited. We can learn a lot about that from the text itself. But most of the process of canonization, I think, is simply lost to history. Preserving the books themselves took priority, and the recording when and why and how those decisions were made wasn't all that important, perhaps even hidden intentionally, and didn't survive the years.

So, to the book club, I'm sorry, I promised something that I can't deliver. I really thought there was more solid material on this than there is. Obviously canonization happened some-how by some-ones, but it's far more complex and shrouded in the shadows of history than I thought it would be.

What do we do with that, a Bible that was tremendously influenced by this process that we know so little about?

In 8th Grade, I had to do a science fair project. I chose something I thought would be simple--Water as the Universal Solvent. The idea is, give water enough time, and it will break down everything. So I thought I'd put some different stuff into water, give it three weeks, and see what happened. It turns

out, nothing happened. I didn't expect anything to disappear, but I thought at least some of the stuff would soften, get a little mushy, something.

But nothing happened. My hypothesis was wrong--it's not that the scientific principle of water's dissolution power is wrong, but I seriously miscalculated the length of time involved.

This thing that I understood to be true was not--at least, not in the same way that I thought it was.

And then I still had to write a paper about it. What was I supposed to write about, just how wrong I was? Well, actually, yes, that would have made a decent paper to write about what I had learned and what was really going on. But instead, I wrote some really fluffy thing about water and minerals that didn't have anything at all to do with my project. And I got the worst grade of my primary schooling, which is why I remember it so clearly.

Anyway, I feel a little bit like that this morning. What I assumed to be true about the Bible, that its origins were something I could understand with a bit more research, turned out to be false. Or at least a lot different than what I thought it was.

And now it's Sunday and I still have to get up here and say something meaningful in spite of the fact that my research turned up inconclusive. Thanks, I can feel your sympathy, and that's all I was going for with that story. :)

I think my experience is reflective of many people's experience with the Bible: *what do we do when we realize that the Bible is not what we thought it was or what we want it to be? When it's not as simple as Menno Simons promised it was? When inspired and inerrant doesn't seem to mean what we would like? When the Bible is inconsistent, raises more questions than it answers, or creates conflict instead of bringing clarity and peace?*

Do I throw it out because it's not what I want it to be? Do I reject whatever parts (or people!) that make me uncomfortable? Do I dig in with my confirmation bias at the ready and look for "alternative facts" to prove that it really is this thing that it doesn't seem to be at the moment?

Here I'll turn it over to Rob Bell:

The Bible is not an argument. It is a record of human experience. The point is not to prove that it's the word of God or it's inspired or it's whatever the current word is that people are using. The point is to enter into its stories with such intention and vitality that you find what it is that inspired people to write these books.

(When you find something inspiring, the last thing on your mind is proving that it's inspired--you're too caught up in actually being inspired.)

If you're trying to prove what it is, you're already lost in the deep weeds.

You have to let it be what it is.

There are lots of passages that are quite mysterious, words in the original language we don't have modern equivalents for, and stories that involve practices and rituals we don't have any context for. (And, I would add, mixed motives and methods for choosing the canon that we may never discover.)

*But if you keep your marbles in the bucket, and you read and listen carefully, you start to see the story behind the story, **the story about people waking up to bigger and more expansive understandings of who they understand God to be and what they believe God is up to in the world.***

Your questions, then, start to take on a new character, because you begin to realize that the more you enter into the humanity of their story, the more you discover that there's something at work, something insistent, something enduring, something that won't let these people go.

*And then you realize that that same force, presence, pull, and call are at work today within you. And in those around you. **And whatever it is that won't let those people go, won't let you go.***

"You have to let it be what it is." What if the Bible really is a story filled with bias, and agendas, and limited perspectives? And what if so many of those are hidden from me, so that I'm left trying to make sense out of a bunch of pieces that don't always fit together or assumptions about intent and purpose? That sounds an awful lot like real life, real communication, real relationships.

That's the beauty of the story of the canon: through the whole thing, God was speaking. Through the people who told the stories to their children, through the poets who spoke of their experiences, through the editors and collectors and copiers and translators, God is speaking. Not because they are unfailingly faithful to some original version of God's words, not in spite of their humanity, but *because* humanity is filled with that "*something at work, something insistent, something enduring, something that won't let these people go.*"

The universe is filled with meaning, and those who seek will find. That's the Spirit of God, in you and me just as with all those who have touched the Scriptures on their way from back then to now. God is at work in our reading and understanding every bit as much as in the ancient process of writing and creating canon.

It's not magic, it's not God doing something beyond the realm of nature. It's God speaking through the natural way of things, through human struggling and trying to make sense of the world, through the years of writing and editing and copying and translating. These stories don't endure because God made them endure, but because there is something divine and sacred in them. God is present in

these stories: that has been the experience of a group of humans for (at least) three thousand years, now.

I think that makes all the difference in how we approach the Bible. Yes it's helpful to have all the background and history and context to understand the way things were back then. But that has limits, and there's a whole lot that we simply don't know. So rather than leaning on our answers and understanding, instead we bring our our questions.

Again, Rob Bell:

Why did people write this down?

What was going on in their world that this was important to them?

Why did they feel the need to put words to this?

Start with that question.

Start with those questions.

And see what happens.

"The word of the Lord." Thanks be to God.