



Third Sunday in Ordinary Time January 27, 2013 C

HOW THE BIBLE CAME TO BE

- How was it decided which books to include?
- Why does the Catholic Old Testament have seven extra books?
- Introduction to the Book of Judith

Recently, I concluded a two-year writing project on the 46 books of the Old Testament. In the first of 80 articles, I respond to three questions that you may have wondered about at some time.

Question 1: How the Bible came to be—five stages

As you probably know, the Bible did not fall down from the heavens. The formation of the Bible has close to a 2,000-year history—beginning with the first historical event narrated, namely, the call of Abraham. This event took place about 1,800 years before Christ and the last book of the New Testament was not written until close to 150 A.D. In his book, *Introduction to the Bible*, Stephen Binz outlines the following five stages in the formation of the Bible.

1. Saving events. The Bible grew out of a series of saving events during which God entered human history. Some of these key events include the call of Abraham, Exodus, Sinai Covenant, entrance into the Promised Land, establishment of a monarchy in Israel, Babylonian Exile, return of the exiles, rededication of the Temple, coming of Jesus, his preaching and miracles, his death, Resurrection and Ascension, coming of the Holy Spirit, and beginning of the Church. All of these events happened within a community. Gradually, they were seen as events in which God revealed himself to his people and invited them to enter into a covenant relationship with him.

2. Oral tradition. The second stage in the formation of the Bible is called oral tradition. Through it, the *memory* and the *meaning* of the saving events were transmitted from one generation to another. Story-telling, poems, songs and rituals were all part of oral tradition.

We may wonder about the accuracy of oral tradition. How do we know that the stories told and retold were faithfully transmitted? Oral tradition is reliable because it is the product of the community. Thus, for example, if

a child in the early Christian community prayed: “Our Father, who art in heaven, Harold be they name,” such a mistake would not be passed on because the community would correct it.

3. Written tradition. Eventually, parts of the oral tradition were written down in a variety of ways: stories, sayings, poems, songs and narratives. But the fact that some things started to be written down did not mean that oral tradition ceased. It didn’t. Both continued side by side.

4. Edited tradition. This stage involved gathering together pieces of the oral and written traditions and formulating them in such a way that they spoke to the lives of the people who lived during the period when the editing process occurred.

5. Canonical tradition. This refers to the process by which some sacred writings became a book of the Bible, while others did not. More on this step later.

One other point to note is that *the Bible was first divided into chapters* in the early part of the thirteenth century by Stephen Langton. Division into verses was introduced by a printer, Robert Estienne, in 1551. So if we made a reference to “John 3:16” prior to the twelfth century, people would not know what we were talking about.

Question 2: How the canon of the Bible was decided

Canon. The term “canon” means “measuring stick.” A *canon* is a measuring stick or ruler used to decide what does and does not fit. Originally, when applied to the Bible, the term *canon* referred to the measuring stick by which a sacred writing was judged to be divinely inspired and accepted or not accepted as a book of the Bible. Today the term canon refers to the 73 books of the Bible, the collection of sacred writings by which the Church’s faith can be measured.

How was the canon of Scripture decided? Stephen Binz responds in this way: “*It was not at all clear to the people of God which of the many writings of the Israelite and Christian communities were to be accepted as the word of God. The books that eventually became part of the Bible had no particular glow that set them apart from the rest. Even the need for a distinctive collection*

of books was not at all evident to the Jewish and Christian communities for a long time.”

The canonical status of the books of the Old Testament was not decided by the Jews until the end of the first century A.D. The Jewish canon did not contain the seven books that Catholics have in their Old Testament canon. In 393 A.D. at the Council of Hippo, Church leadership decided which sacred writings in circulation at the time should be admitted into the canon of the New Testament.

How did Church leadership decide which books to admit into the New Testament canon? In general, we can say that the decision was based on which books best captured the vision and message of Christ, which books best nurtured the faith of the people. More specifically, a book was accepted into the canon of the New Testament because of its *apostolicity* (written by an apostle or an early church figure), *orthodoxy* (reflected the authentic beliefs of early Christianity), *continuity* (had links with the beginnings of Christianity).

Question 3: Why Catholic bibles have seven extra books

The Hebrew Bible written by Jewish authors/editors contains 39 books. When this Bible was translated into Greek for Greek-speaking Jews who lived outside of Judah in the third and second century B.C., seven other books were added, resulting in 46 books in the Old Testament. The Greek translation of the Hebrews became known as the *Septuagint* because it was believed to have been written by 70 writers.

The seven additional books are Judith, Tobit, Baruch, Wisdom, Sirach and 1 & 2 Maccabees—often called the *deuterocanonical* (second canon) books because there was a certain reluctance by the Church to admit these books into the canon of Scripture. Furthermore, the Greek edition has larger versions of the books of Esther and Daniel. While the early Christians primarily used the *Septuagint* version of the Hebrew Scriptures, many Jews did not. Protestants call the deuterocanonical book *apocrypha*, which ascribes the writings to human authorship rather than divine inspiration.

Reacting to the increasing numbers of Greek-speaking Jewish community members who were converting to Christianity, the Jews, especially under the guidance of rabbis who had survived the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., began to teach that only the Hebrew language could be the language of the inspired Word of God, differentiating themselves from the Christians. As a result, from the second and third centuries A.D., only the Hebrew version of the Old Testament was held to be canonical by the vast majority of Jews.

Many centuries later when Protestant Reformation leader Martin Luther translated the Bible, he used the Hebrew canon of the Old Testament which did not contain the seven above-mentioned books. The Catholic Church continued to retain the Septuagint version of the Old Testament, believing all 46 books to be divinely inspired. The seven extra books are recognized by Protestants as sacred books. The primary distinction in modern times is that they are used *liturgically* by the Roman Catholic Church but not by the Jews and Protestants.

In the first article, I also address the question of what we mean by divine inspiration, inerrancy (a difficult term since the bible contains many errors), the Catholic approach to biblical interpretation and the seven big blocks in *Salvation History*, e.g., *Block #4 covers the Conquest of the Promised Land, Era of the Judges—1250 BC to 1050 BC* (Bible Books: Joshua and Judges).

I have written long and short articles on each of the 46 books of the Old Testament.

The ***long version*** has an *introduction* to each book and a *commentary* on the chapters of the book.

The ***short version*** has the long version introduction. Each book has the division of chapters and suggested texts to read. The short version does not have commentaries but if you read a particular text that you have a question about, you could always refer to the commentary found in the long version which would hopefully address your question.

The Book of Judith

The following is my introduction to the book of Judith, a holy woman who ‘manned up’ big time for her people in a time of great danger.

In its introduction to Judith, the *Collegeville Bible Commentary* states: *The book of Judith was written during the period of the Maccabean revolt. Its setting is in an earlier period, but many details reveal the author’s interest in his own time rather than that of the seventh century B.C. In the story, an Israelite town is besieged by Holofernes, commander-in chief of the Assyrian army. The town leaders despair of help from God and declare that if deliverance does not come within five days, they will surrender. A beautiful widow, an observant Jew, upon hearing the decision of the elders, scolds them for their lack of faith. She prays, placing herself in the hands of God. Finally, she prepares her weapon – beauty. Using her beauty, she beheads Holofernes and delivers her people.*

The message of the book is that victory comes not from human might but through the power of God. God can deliver his faithful people at whatever time and in whatever way God wishes. Even though the way of deliverance may look like folly from a human point of view, the story of Judith demonstrates that the real fools are those who place their trust in human power and weapons. The whole army of Holofernes is defenseless against God's weapon—the beauty of a faithful woman (p.844).

In its introduction to Judith, *The Catholic Bible—Personal Study Edition* reads: *The book of Judith is a piece of literature for difficult times. It was hoped that the reader would take to heart the lesson that God was still the master of history who could save Israel from her enemies. There is a parallel with the time of the Exodus: As God had delivered the people by the hand of Moses, so God could deliver them by the hand of the pious widow Judith....*

The story of Judith is full of unexpected turns. The most obvious, especially to those who first heard or read the story, is that a woman—not a man—saved Judah in time of severe distress. Judith is more faithful and resourceful than any of the men of Bethulia. She is more eloquent than the king and more courageous than the leading citizens of the city. While the king, priests, and leaders, show themselves incapable of dealing with the crisis, Judith stands up to the threat posed by Holofernes, and takes decisive action to end that threat (p.54).

Division of Chapters

PART 1: The Assyrians pose a threat to Israel (Chapters 1-7)

PART 2: Judith saves Israel from Assyrian invasion (Chapters 8-16)

Sample commentary

CHAPTER 4: The people of Israel cry out to the Lord

“All the people of Israel cried out to God with great fervor and did penance....” (v.9)

Holofernes, with an army of 120,000 select troops and 12,000 cavalry, is ready to attack Bethulia, a tiny Israelite village whose main hero is an insignificant childless widow. *“The battle is between gods. Each god summons the best in human power in order to defeat the other. Nebuchadnezzar trusts in human force, God in human virtue. Each of the divine figures is represented in the action by a mortal figure. Nebuchadnezzar is represented by his general in chief,*

Holofernes. God is represented by the holy woman Judith” (Collegeville Commentary p.846).

When the Israelites who live in Judea hear of all that Holofernes has done to the nation, they become extremely fearful. Their fear is not just for themselves, but also for the temple and the holy city, Jerusalem.

The temple is the sign of God's presence in their midst. Rather than surrender to a mighty army, the Israelites prepare to resist in two ways. First, there are physical or material preparations: the people post guards and store up provisions from the newly gathered harvest. Second, they prepare spiritually with prayer and fasting.

CHAPTERS 5-6: Holofernes receives a lesson on Israel and their God

“Who are you, Achior, to prophesy among us as you have done today, and to tell us not to fight against the Israelites because their God protects them? What god is there beside Nebuchadnezzar? He will send his force and destroy them from the face of the earth. Their god will not save them, but we, the servants of Nebuchadnezzar, will strike them down as one man, for they will be unable to withstand the force of our cavalry.” (6:2-3)

When Holofernes hears that Israel is not ready to surrender to his mighty army, he calls his council and asks these questions: Who are these people? Why are they different? Why has every other nation of the West surrendered and this tiny country refused? Who is their king? What is their power? In answer to these questions, the reader finds the central message of the book.

For the rest of my commentary on Judith, see Article 41.

Pause: What speaks to you most in the first chapters of Judith?

You may wish to enhance your reading of the Old Testament by going through my long and short versions of each of the books. All 80 articles are available on this website: eamontobin.com, click on — *Commentaries on the Books of the Old Testament*. I will also appreciate your letting others know about this resource.

Have a blessed week,

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