

## Letting the Bible Tell Its Own Stories

*By Jim Myers*

The Bible is the most famous book in the history of the world and there are many different beliefs about it. Some believe that the words of their Bible are the inerrant and infallible word of God. Others say they are inspired by God, but are not to be taken literally. And, still others view them as traditions, legends and myths. What people believe about the Bible makes a big difference in the way its words affect their lives.

Beliefs about the Bible are clearly linked to beliefs about God. If God does not lie and His words are always the absolute truth, then, if the words in the Bible are the literal word of God they must also be the absolute truth. Of course, if the Bible is not the literal word of God, then that completely changes how the words of the Bible would be viewed. These deferring views have fanned the flames of theological conflict for the past century among Christians and Jews. Of course, Christians and Jews do not have the same books in their Bibles.

Conflicts over holy books isn't limited to just Christians and Jews. However, it is especially intense when monotheistic religions are involved. About twenty years ago I was watching a program on an educational channel about who owns the land of Israel, the Israelis or the Palestinians. The Jewish side was represented by some ultraorthodox rabbis, while the Palestinian representatives were Islamic extremists. As the discussions progressed it became clear that ultimately the claims presented by both sides ultimately rested on the words of their holy books. Both said that God that had given them the land.

The debate became more heated as the program continued, and at times the men stood up and shook their holy books at each other. If the subject hadn't been so serious, it would almost have been funny to watch. As time passed and their voices grew louder and louder, I was afraid the men were about to physically attack each other. Suddenly, one of the rabbis laid his holy book down, threw his hands into the air and shouted for everyone to be quiet. Once he had everyone's attention he calmly said:

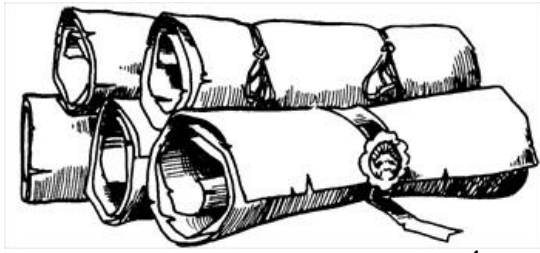
***"Well I guess it all comes down to which book you read!"***

You should have seen the looks on their faces as they all silently looked at each other, until one of the Palestinians finally broke out in a smile. The man looked at everyone and said, "Well, I guess we can agree on that!" Everyone started laughing and shook their heads in the affirmative. The moderator said something like, "That sums it up. If you read the **Tanakh** (Jewish Scriptures) the land belongs to the Jews. But, if you read the **Quran** (Islamic Scriptures) it belongs to the Palestinians. Maybe we should take time to find out more about the books."

I completely agreed with the moderator and began do some work to find out more about my holy book, the Bible. One of the first things I discovered was that until after the time of Jesus there were no books. The Scriptures were recorded on individual scrolls, not in a book. The earliest form of a book was called a *codex*, and it was first described by the 1st-century CE Roman poet Martial (38-104 CE), who praised its convenient use. The codex achieved numerical parity with the scroll around 300 CE, and then completely replaced the scrolls in the Greco-Roman world by the 6th century.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus did not carry a "Bible" around with him and read from it as he taught his disciples. The people listening to him did not have Bibles with them or in their homes. There are two reasons that most people did not own any scrolls. First, since they were hand copied they were very expensive. Second, it must be understood that a majority of the population was non-literate<sup>2</sup> in the ancient world. Reading and writing were restricted to the professional elite, primarily the scribes. The rate of literacy in ancient Egypt was slightly higher, but no more than 7% of the population. In the classical world the situation was not much different. Greece had an overall literacy rate of about 10%.<sup>3</sup> The rate in ancient Israel may have been slightly higher; but, the bottom line was that even if everyone had access to the scrolls during the time of Jesus, more than 90% of them would not have been able to read them.

The two things that we take for granted today, being able to own and read our own Bible, were unknown until after the 15<sup>th</sup> century when Gutenberg created the printing press. Only when cheap mass produced books were available it was impossible to provide the general public with the books required to achieve a public education. Literacy rates climbed steadily after they were available. How would it affect your understanding of Scriptures if they were written on individual scrolls and not in one book? Think about all of the books that are found in your Bible and then picture them as separate scrolls. Would it even be possible for one person to carry all of them? Since the scrolls contained no chapter and verse markers, how long would it take you to find a particular section or verse?



**INDIVIDUAL SCROLLS<sup>4</sup>**

**NOT**



**A SINGLE BOOK<sup>5</sup>**

Another point that must be understood is that the scrolls of the books of the Bible were not all written at the same time by the same person. Based on our research we know that the first biblical scroll was written in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE in Babylon by Ezra the Temple Scribe and a group of other priests and Temple scribes. At that time they were living in captivity. The first scroll was called the **Torah**, which is translated as "**instructions**" or "**laws**." The **Torah** contains the writings that are recorded in the first five books of the **Tanakh** (Jewish Scriptures) and **Christian Old Testament**.

Here is a list of each book's Hebrew name and its meaning. The names of the Christian books are in parenthesis: **Bereishith** - "In the beginning" (**Genesis**); **Shemoth** - "The names" (**Exodus**); **Vayiqra** - "And He called" (**Leviticus**); **Bamidbar** - "In the wilderness" (**Numbers**); and **Devarim** - "The words" (**Deuteronomy**).

The **Torah** is the first of three sections of the Jewish **canon**. *A canon is a collection of books that are authorized, recognized and accepted as being the standard by which truth is measured.* All three sections did not acquire canonical status at the same point in time and not all Jewish sects accepted all three as being canonical.

The second section of the Tanakh to be canonized was the **Nevi-im** (the Prophets) around the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE. At the time of Jesus they would have probably been written on eight separate scrolls: **Yehoshua** (Joshua); **Shoftim** (Judges); **Shmuel** (I & II Samuel); **Melakhim** (I & II Kings); **Yeshayah** (Isaiah); **Yirmyah** (Jeremiah); **Yechezqel** (Ezekiel); **The Twelve** (treated as one book) which included **Hoshea** (Hosea); **Yoel** (Joel); **Amos**; **Ovadyah** (Obadiah); **Yonah** (Jonah); **Mikhah** (Micah); **Nachum**; **Chavaqquq** (Habbakkuk); **Tzefanyah** (Zephaniah); **Chaggai**; **Zekharyah** (Zechariah); and, **Malakhi**.

About the same time as this section was canonized three of the major Jewish sects appear -- **Sadducees**, **Pharisees**, and **Essenes**. Many of the priests were Sadducees and it controlled the Temple. Please do not make the mistake of viewing the Temple as simply a religious institution like a church or synagogue. Remember, the Torah was the law of the land, therefore the Temple must be

viewed as an institution that would be the equivalent to the way we view Congress, the executive branch of government, the judicial branch of government and the Federal Reserve System. The Temple was a very powerful institution and it regulated every aspect of Jewish life as long it stood.

The **Sadducees** held that only the **Torah** was canonical, while the Pharisees held that the **Torah** and the **Nevi'im** (Prophets) were both canonical. The book of Matthew reveals what the position of Jesus was in that disagreement.

Do not think that I have come to abolish the **Torah**<sup>6</sup> or the **Prophets**; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. Amen!<sup>7</sup>

Jesus agreed with the Pharisees on the question of Jewish Scriptures. It is clear from other writings from the Late Second Temple Period and the New Testament that Jesus, the Pharisees and Sadducees were also familiar with the scrolls that will be included in the third section of the Tanakh, which is called the **Ketuvim** (Writings). The third section did not receive their final canonical status until close of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE after the Second Temple was destroyed.

The books in the third section are these: **Tehillim** (Psalms); **Mishlei** (Proverbs); **Iyov** (Job); **Shir Ha-Shirim** (Song of Songs); **Ruth**; **Eikhah** (Lamentations); **Qoheleth** (the author's name) (Ecclesiastes); **Esther**; **Daniel**; **Ezra & Nechemyah** (Nehemiah) (treated as one book); and, **Divrei Ha-Yamim** – “The words of the days” (Chronicles).

### **None of the books of the New Testament existed at the time of Jesus.**

Jesus did not write any new scriptures for his movement. ***The Jesus Movement did not have a New Testament!*** The first attempt to create a new Christian canon would not be done until about 140 CE, therefore for at least a century after the crucifixion of Jesus the Tanakh was the only Scriptures of Christianity. In the period after the crucifixion of Jesus until the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE the central authority of the Jesus Movement was in Judea. It was headed by Jacob (James) the brother of Jesus. Jacob and the apostles that Jesus had personally chosen were the leaders of the movement.

The period between the destruction of the Temple and the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE many of the books that are in the modern **New Testament** were written. Their authors were from different Christian groups and their writings reflect the beliefs of those groups. After the originals were written they were hand copied and recopied by others and those copies circulated as independent texts among the different Christian communities. In the previous issue of *Discovering the Bible* I wrote about a man named Theophilus that was caught in a conflict created by differences in the scrolls that were in circulation that supposedly contained accounts about the life and teachings of Jesus.

Many have undertaken to draw up a narrative of the events that have been accomplished among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word. . . . I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth about the things you have been taught.<sup>8</sup>

Apparently there were a number of scrolls in circulation, but they were not all the same. Different Christian groups held different beliefs about who Jesus was and what he taught. Thanks to the choices made over three centuries later by the Roman Church, we are able to understand what some of those differences were. A good example is seen in the birth accounts of Jesus. I am sure you are very familiar with the Christmas story. When I was a child we always performed the Christmas play at church and school. The main characters were Jesus, Mary, Joseph, the wise men, shepherds and angels. I usually ended up being a shepherd. What most Christians do not realize is that the Christmas play isn't found in their Bible.

When we examine each of the four Gospel's birth accounts for Jesus we find some very important differences. They are important because they reveal a great deal about the beliefs of each Christian community and how they viewed Jesus. We will view them in the chronological order of when they were written. Most scholars agree that Mark was the first Gospel to be written, so we will begin there. Here is what Mark tell us about the birth of Jesus.<sup>9</sup>

- (1) Jesus came from Nazareth in the Galilee.
- (2) He was a grown man when he was baptized by John in the Jordan.
- (3) The Spirit descended on him like a dove at his baptism.
- (4) A voice came from heaven that said, "You are my Son . . ."

The next Gospel to written was Luke. Let's see what it reveals about the birth of Jesus (Luke 1 & 2).

- (1) God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth to Mary.
- (2) Gabriel told her she would give birth to a son, and call him Jesus.
- (3) Gabriel said Jesus would sit on the throne of his father David.
- (4) Mary explained that she was a virgin and asked how this would occur.
- (5) Gabriel said the Holy Spirit would "overshadow" her.
- (6) Caesar Augustus required people to return to their own town for a census.
- (7) Joseph traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem to register for it.
- (8) Mary gave birth and placed son him in a manger, because there was no guest room available.
- (9) An angel appeared to shepherds living in nearby the fields and told them a Savior has been born in Bethlehem and was lying in a manger.

- (10) The shepherds found Mary, Joseph, and the baby. They spread the word concerning what the angel told them about the child.
- (11) When he was eighth days old he was circumcised and named Jesus.
- (12) Joseph and Mary took him to the Temple for purification rites.
- (13) Afterwards Joseph and Mary returned to Nazareth.
- (14) Jesus child grew up and became strong there.

Mark appears to know nothing about the information recorded by Luke, otherwise why would he leave things so important out. Readers of Luke are given different expectations about Jesus than those of Mark. Mark's Jesus is introduced as a convert of John the Baptist. Luke's Jesus is introduced as a divinely chose Savior who would become the King of Israel. Now let's see what Matthew says about the birth of Jesus (Matthew 1 & 2).

- (1) Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph.
- (2) Before they had sex Mary became pregnant through the Holy Spirit.
- (3) Joseph wanted to divorce her and not expose her to public disgrace.
- (4) An angel appeared to him in a dream and explained everything.
- (5) He married Mary but did not have sex until she had given birth.
- (6) Joseph named the boy Jesus.
- (7) Jesus was born in Bethlehem.
- (8) Magi from the east came to Jerusalem looking for the new king of the Jews.
- (9) They said they saw his star when it rose and came to worship him.
- (10) King Herod heard about this and was disturbed.
- (11) Herod called the Magi secretly and talked to them.
- (12) He sent them to Bethlehem.
- (13) They found Jesus with his mother and worshiped him.
- (14) They presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.
- (15) They had been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod.
- (16) They returned to their country by another route.
- (17) An angel told Joseph in a dream that Herod was going to try to kill Jesus.
- (18) He took Jesus and Mary to Egypt until the death of Herod.
- (19) Herod ordered all the boys in Bethlehem and the area two years old killed.
- (20) After Herod died, an angel appeared in a dream to Joseph and told him to return to the land of Israel.
- (21) Joseph traveled back to Judea, but was warned in another dream it was not safe for them to live in Bethlehem.
- (22) He was told to move to a town called Nazareth.

In this account an angel visits Joseph instead of Mary. Apparently they lived in Bethlehem at the beginning. Nothing was said about a census ordered by the Roman emperor. This time Magi arrive looking for the new king, but they weren't sent by an angel. They followed a star. Once they arrive they start asking people where the new king was and ended up meeting Herod. He tells them to go to

Bethlehem, which they do and find Jesus. They give Jesus valuable gifts and secretly return to their homeland. No angel appears to any shepherds telling them about Jesus. No shepherds come to visit Jesus. Instead of going to the Temple, an angel sends Joseph and his family to Egypt, because the Temple is not a safe place because of Herod. They stay in Egypt until after Herod's death. Another angel tell them it is safe to return, but before they arrive in Bethlehem another angel tells them to go to Nazareth instead.

These are not simply variations of the same story. They are different stories. They have different characters and events. Now let's turn to the final Gospel, John, and see what it says (John 1:1-14).

- (1) In the beginning was the Word.
- (2) The Word was with God.
- (3) The Word was God.
- (4) He was with God in the beginning.
- (5) Through him all things were made.
- (6) In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.
- (7) The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.
- (8) He is the one and only Son, who came from the Father.

This time there are no angels, virgin birth, shepherds, Magi, Temple, circumcision, purification rights or fleeing to Egypt until Herod dies. All of the two year old boys in Bethlehem were not murdered by Herod. The Jesus in John's account is about a cosmic entity that was involved in the creation of the universe. He mysteriously became flesh and lived among mankind. He is the only Son of the Father. Clearly this community's view of Jesus is completely different from that of the other communities.

The New Testament contains a wealth of information about how the different early Christian communities viewed Jesus and his teachings. Fundamentalists' doctrines created in the late 1800s required members to view the words of the Bible in a way that ignored the obvious differences. Don't you think it is about time to allow each book of the Bible to tell its own story? Shouldn't our goal be to learn what the accounts say, instead of ignoring the differences? **BHC**

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<sup>1</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Codex>

<sup>2</sup> Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible; p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible; p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.themcs.org/pictures/Scrolls.jpg>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.auburn.edu/~allenkc/graphics/bible2.gif>

<sup>6</sup> Many English translations have ölawö here.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 5:17-18a

<sup>8</sup> Luke 1:1-4

<sup>9</sup> Mark 1:9-11

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# January Memorials

*In Loving Memory*

**MURLIN  
BENTLEY**

May 24, 1929  
January 20, 1996

*May you dwell under His  
wings in complete  
SHALOM forever!*

*In Loving Memory*

**GLADYS  
GERALDINE  
MYERS**

October 1, 1916  
January 29, 2009

*May you dwell under His  
wings in complete  
SHALOM forever!*

## In Their Remembrance

*May their memories inspire us to  
seek those qualities of mind and  
heart which they shared when we  
walked life's journey together.*

*May we help to bring closer to  
fulfillment their highest ideals and  
noblest strivings.*

*May their memories deepen our  
loyalty to those things which we  
valued and shared --  
faith, love, peace and devotion  
and our biblical heritage.*

*As long as we live, they too will  
live; for they are now a part of us,  
as we remember them.*

(Inspired from prayers found in Yitzhor  
Reflections - The New Mahzor - The  
Prayer Book Press)

*In Loving Memory*

**JULIE FALLIN  
KELSOE**

January 12, 1960  
January 19, 1990

*May you dwell under His  
wings in complete  
SHALOM forever!*

*In Loving Memory*

**HOMER  
MELTON  
(DOC) PITNER**

October 7, 1914  
January 10, 1971

*May you dwell under His  
wings in complete  
SHALOM forever!*



Helping us remember those who came before us is a very important part of the Biblical Heritage Center's mission. They are the ones who make it possible for us to experience the joy and freedom of our world today. They are also a very important part of our biblical heritage. It is our privilege to honor them by the Memorials printed in The Biblical Heritage Report and in the Memorial Garden section of our website - <http://www.biblicalheritage.org>. Please visit the website Memorial the next time you are on the Internet. Please send us information about those who you would like to remember and we will remember them too.

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## Shouldn't We Let the Books of our Bible Tell Their Own Stories?

*Our goal is to provide you with accurate cultural and historical information about our biblical heritages. An important part of that goal is to view the books of our Bible in their original historical and cultural contexts and then follow their journeys across the centuries to us.*

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