



## BIBLICAL HERITAGE REPORT & DISCOVERING THE BIBLE

*Creating a better, happier and safer world through research & the distribution of factual information about our religious & spiritual histories!*

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# Every Bible Has a History: Part 1

*By Jim Myers*

Religion is playing an increasingly important role in the political arena. Religious issues such as abortion, same-sex marriages, etc. are being debated in the houses of state and houses of God. The common denominator for those who claim to be the spokesmen and spokeswomen of God is that they support their positions by quoting from their Holy Book, which is usually called “The Bible.”

It came as a shock to me when I learned that there is no such thing as “The Bible.” I know that it is common knowledge that “the Bible” stands at the top of the “Best Seller” list ever year. I also know if there is a book that we will find in more American homes than any other it is called “The Holy Bible.” However, I also know that the contents of those Bibles are very different.

### **Our Bibles Are Different Libraries – Not a Single Book**

When we flip through the pages of our modern Bibles we see that it isn’t initially divided into chapters – it is a group of books. The first one is called “The First Book of Moses,” which is usually named “Genesis.” Each book is then divided into chapters and verses. If we continue to flip we will find other books -- “The Book of Joshua,” “The Book of Ruth,” etc. Even though all of these writings are now found between the covers of one book, it wasn’t always the case. In the beginning they were all separate scrolls and those scrolls were not divided into chapters and verses.

### **First vs. Second Temple Authority**

The destruction of the First Temple changed the Israelite nation forever. Prior to the destruction, Israel was a tribal society. The position one occupied in the society was tied to one’s tribe and family position in that tribe. In order to hold one of the two primary positions of power – king or high priest – one had to be from the tribes of Judah or Levi. There was, however, a secondary position of power that influenced the nation for many centuries – *the prophets and their schools.*

The Temple was the domain of the Levitical Priesthood. It was a world in which the priests kept to themselves the decisions on matters of ritual, morals and spiritual mysteries. The spiritual life of the nation of ancient Israel flowed from the Temple. Its rituals were only understood by and under the control of the priests. They controlled the sacred space of Israel and access to Israel’s God -- Yahweh. The High Priest represented the people before Yahweh and anointed the head of each new king.

The authority of kingship ended with the invasion of the Babylonians and Persians. After those defeats the lands of Israel and Judah were under the authority of foreign kings who were involved with other priesthoods and their gods. The Levitical Priesthood also experienced a very important change under the authority of the foreign kings, which made the Second Temple different from the First Temple.

Ezra's position of authority in the Second Temple was not derived from a Divine Revelation. Ezra arrived at Jerusalem as a Persian commissioner whose authority was established by a royal letter written by a foreign king. Ezra also brought something else back from Babylon – a new law for Israel. It is the first known “Bible” and is called the “Torah.” The “Torah” was the Bible of the Levitical Priesthood of the Second Temple. The books of the Torah are:

- (1) Bereshit (Genesis)
- (2) Shemoth (Exodus)
- (3) Va'Yiqra (Leviticus)
- (4) Bamidbar (Numbers)
- (5) Devarim (Deuteronomy)

The process of selecting and combining a group of scrolls into an authoritative collection is called “canonization.” The word “canon” comes from the Greek κανών (kanon). It originally meant “reed” (English “cannon”) and came to mean something firm and straight. Just like we use a ruler or level to measure and check our work, a *canon is used to test something for accuracy*. The canon came to be the “standard” by which teachings may be judged as correct or incorrect.

The five books that were selected to be in the Torah were not the only scrolls in existence – they were the ones that were chosen. Who chose them? They were selected by a group of priests. An authoritative group selects which writings will be included or excluded – a group creates the canon. It is very important for us to understand how the canonization process works.

The priests selected five scrolls from among many other scrolls. A number of the other scrolls were written by the other religious authority figures of the First Temple era – the prophets. It is debated as to whether the prophets actually penned the scrolls themselves or whether members of their “schools” copied their words. Either way, it is clear that the writings of the prophets shared a common theme – the abuses of power and corruption of the priests and kings. *It should come as no great surprise that the priests chose not to include any of them in their canon.*

When the Jews returned from Babylonia they returned not as tribes but as clans. The entire tribal structure was destroyed. Many Jews did not return to the land of Israel, but remained in Babylonia; later, many Jews left the land of Israel in order to live throughout the Mediterranean basin. As a result of these changes, Judaism gradually redefined itself more as a religion than as a nationality.

The incorporation of a canon and the appointment of priest by foreign kings made the religion of the Second Temple very different from the First Temple. It also produced a new group of authority figures -- the scribes. They should be viewed as lawyers not just people who made copies of scrolls. They imperceptibly challenged and compromised the authority and supremacy of the official priesthood. The Temple remained at the center of the religion, but the words of the Torah increasingly influenced how the people understood the role of the Temple and priesthood – and their relationship with the God of Israel.

The scribes were different from the clergy and not dependent on the Temple. It was the Torah that they based their authority upon. They focused on the study and teaching of the words of the ancient texts. The scribes did not limit their study to just the words of the Torah, they also were well-versed in the writings of the prophets.

The work of the scribes led to the creation of three new literary genres:

- (1) scriptural translation
- (2) paraphrase
- (3) commentary

As the knowledge of the new canon of Israel – the Torah – and the influence of the scribes increased another new religious invention would be created – sects. Membership in the sects was not determined by tribe or family. It was determined by belief in the accuracy of one group’s interpretation and understanding of “scripture” over those of others. It should come as no surprise that new groups led to new canons – as you will see in the next article! **BHR**

# The Biblical Heritage Center Guiding Principle

*Our respective systems of beliefs serve as the foundation for our security, the basis for our values and way of life, and the standard to which we turn when faced with important decisions. Such beliefs are primary factors in forming the way we see the world – our reality.*

Living in a post September 11<sup>th</sup> era, we are now facing a challenge that hits at the very heart of our spiritual foundation – the potential deadly consequences of religious belief systems. History reveals that people who blindly follow dogmatic religious belief systems represent a threat to civilized society and the quality of life of their fellow man. Religious beliefs have been at the heart of countless conflicts ranging from interfamily fights to bloody wars between nations. This cycle of conflict has been repeated countless times throughout the history of mankind.

The Biblical Heritage Center has concluded that the only healthy solution to this situation is the voluntary incorporation of factual information by individuals who sincerely desire and search for spiritual truth. The result of the inclusion of factual information is that the belief system is expanded and the person becomes more open to examining their personal beliefs, as well as becoming more willing to change when error or incomplete information is discovered. Those who follow this principle become more compassionate and tolerant, thereby making our world a safer and happier place.

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