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The Year of the Word 2007

Bible's history is a love story

By Mary Beth Hubba

What is the Bible? The name derives from the Latin and Greek words meaning “books.” A perennial “best-seller,” the Bible is unlike any other written work. Rooted in oral traditions, its formal composition spans over a thousand years and has many authors. For believers, the Bible is God’s inspired word, a divine communication entrusted to human authorship so that humanity may come to understand how much God desires a relationship with his creation. This sacred text records the history of a spiritual journey as God reveals himself to the chosen people of Israel, to the Christian community that grew from those Jewish origins and to us today.

Christians refer to the major divisions of the Bible as the Old and New Testaments. Catholics accept an Old Testament canon consisting of 39 books written in Hebrew and Aramaic and seven composed in Greek.

This differs from the Hebrew Scriptures, defined by first century Jews who codified only texts written in Hebrew and Aramaic. Protestants adhere to the Hebrew canon. The seven additional books are called Deuterocanonical, although the label “apocryphal” is used by non-Catholics.

All Christians accept a New Testament consisting of 27 books from the Greek.

The Old Testament is the story of the Hebrews, later named Jews, who came to recognize one God above all others. While we may refer to these works as a history of God’s chosen people, they are not a chronology of precise dates, events, and persons. In addition to stories about events and people, there are also laws, songs, poetry, wise sayings, and other literary forms, each with its own voice describing the love and forgiveness of God for humanity.

The earliest stories in the Bible date from oral traditions of a Semitic people beginning around 1900 B.C., culminating in the defining moment of Exodus around 1300 B.C. Later books describe the monarchy of David and Solomon (around 1020-930 B.C.), the division of the kingdom and eventual exile of both Israel and Judah (eighth to sixth centuries B.C.), and the return from exile to lands governed by the Greeks and later the Romans. Between the 10th and sixth centuries before Christ many voices told the stories that form the final text. Often multiple traditions combine in a single book. While canonically the last book is Malachi, it is the Books of Maccabees (circa 100 B.C.) that chronologically ends the Old Testament.

Jesus Christ, the fulfillment of the Old and the beginning of the New, is chronicled in the Gospels and letters. The Gospels reveal the Messiah, four separate voices telling one story, beginning with Jesus’ birth and ending with his crucifixion and resurrection (30-33 A.D.). Mark’s account is the earliest, written in the late 60s or early 70s, while Matthew and Luke were likely written in the mid 80s and John not until the 90s, possibly closer to 100 A.D.

However, it is the epistles or letters that are the earliest New Testament writings. Traditionally, Paul is said to have converted in 36 A.D. The First Letter to the Thesalonians, written around the year 50, is the oldest Christian document of record. His writings span about a decade and record our earliest insights of the developing church. Some of the letters originally attributed to Paul were most likely written by disciples in the 80s or 90s, such as Ephesians and Hebrews. In the New Testament, the final book is Revelation, most likely written in the mid-90s. However, the Second Letter of Peter is chronologically the last, with a date near 130 A.D.

Throughout time, God speaks to his people through his inspired Word.

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