

Introduction

The word “Bible” derives from a Greek word meaning *book*. There is, however, a fundamental misconception at work here. Most people today assume that *biblia* is a feminine singular, meaning “The Book,” whereas in fact it is a neuter plural, *τα βιβλία ta biblia*, meaning “The Books”; i.e., not a single book but a collection of books. Not only does the Bible constitute a collection, but the books are arranged in a certain way, making it an organized collection of books. Therefore, the Bible is most properly thought of not as a single book, but as a religious library.

The main division in Christian Bibles is between the Old and New Testaments. The word “testament” derives from a Greek word that properly means covenant, and is used in the sense of a record of God’s dealings with man. For Latter-day Saints, the title “Old Testament” is a bit of a misnomer, as there has only been one covenant between God and man, which has been renewed at various times throughout human history. Nevertheless, since that is the common terminology in Christian circles, we use it as well, but we must always remain mindful that the expression should not be understood in any sort of a pejorative sense, as if the Old Testament were outdated or no longer constitutes scripture.

The New Testament contains 27 books, organized as follows: First are four examples of a unique literary genre called “Gospels,” from Anglo-Saxon god-spell, or the “good news” of Jesus Christ. The first three of these Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, are referred to as the synoptics, from a Greek-derived word meaning “to see together,” because they share much material and have an obvious relationship to each other. The Acts of the Apostles, which constitutes a sequel to the Gospel of Luke, is a book of history, dealing primarily with the ministries of Peter and Paul. Next comes a collection of 21 letters. The letters written by Paul come first, in three groups: the letters to congregations, arranged from the longest to the shortest; the letters to individuals (the “pastoral epistles”), similarly ordered; and then Hebrews, which is placed last because of persistent uncertainty as to its actual author. After Paul’s letters are letters written by others, the catholic (that is, “universal”) epistles. The final book in the New Testament is the Revelation of John, also known as the Apocalypse (from the Greek word for “revelation”).

None of the books of the New Testament was actually written by Jesus. Whereas the books of the Old Testament were written and collected over a great period of time, the books of the New Testament were written during a span of less than a hundred years following the death and resurrection of the Savior. At first, material about Jesus circulated orally, but over time the need to record in writing the deeds and sayings of the Savior became apparent. Collections of writings built up slowly. A particular church may have had one or two letters of Paul and perhaps a Gospel, but over time the churches gathered more material until they had entire collections of such writings. The movement from the scroll form to the codex form of the book allowed such writings to be bound together in a single volume. The rise of heretics with their own sacred books in the second century began to make it imperative to identify a “canon.” The word canon derives from a word meaning a reed used for measuring purposes; it came to mean a rule, and then an authoritative collection of texts. Various canon lists circulated, some including books that ultimately did not make the cut, such as the Shepherd of Hermas, and others excluding books that ultimately would make the cut, such as Revelation or the letter of James. Eventually,

in AD 367, the canon of 27 books we know today was finally established.

No original manuscript of any New Testament book exists, nor is one likely ever to be found. There are over 5,000 manuscripts containing all or portions of the New Testament in Greek from pre-printing press antiquity. How are we to know which of these manuscripts to follow in any particular case? The immediately succeeding section gives a basic overview of the ways that scholars sort through the many variant readings in the manuscripts to determine the most likely original text. It also gives the uninitiated reader some sense of the limitations of New Testament scholarship.

The books of the New Testament were not originally written in English, which did not yet exist as a language, but in the koine (or common) Greek of the time. The literary quality of the Greek used varies among the books, the most classical being Hebrews and Luke-Acts, and the least classical being Revelation and Mark. Throughout the New Testament there are expressions colored by the native Aramaic idiom of the writers. Appendix A gives basic information about the Greek language used to compose the New Testament. Our notes make frequent reference to Greek words and expressions in seeking to assist the reader to understand the English text of the KJV.

The common English Bible for Latter-day Saints is the KJV. But the KJV was first published in the early 17th century, so it is understandably archaic and therefore in some measure difficult to comprehend. While many Christians have gone to using other, more modern translations, such as the New International Version, our continuing commitment to the KJV means that we need to make some effort to understand it better. We have provided here two Appendices (B and C) to assist with this aim: first, a general introduction to the KJV, and second, a primer on the early modern (or “Jacobean”) English used in that version. We also provide as Appendix D the original introduction to the King James Bible, *The Translators to the Reader*, which provides significant insight into the production of that translation.

In Appendix E, we point the reader to various additional resources that will enrich his or her study of the New Testament, including some of the work previously published by other LDS scholars.

In our notes on the text, we have made some effort to introduce the reader to some of the basics of New Testament scholarship. We have therefore on occasion used terminology with which the reader may be unfamiliar. Although we have endeavored to explain this terminology when we have used it, we have also provided as Appendix F a glossary of terms for easy reference.

References

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