
About the Bible

by: Ronald L. Dart

What did the first Christians believe about the Bible? It is an interesting question for several reasons, not the least because, there was no Bible, at least not like we know it when those first Christians were finding their way in the world.

The books of what we now call the New Testament were being written in the years between about 55 A.D. and 70 A.D. To the first Christians, these were the written testimonies and letters of the apostles. We know about when they were written, because scholars have dated the first of the writings to the mid 50's A.D. and not one of the New Testament documents show any sign that the Temple had been destroyed in 70 A.D. An event that big, would've found some expression somewhere in those documents.

Documents Copied

Well, in the years following the destruction of the Temple, the second generation of Christians came on the scene, and these documents were copied and recopied and scattered all around the Roman Empire.

Now imagine for a moment, that you are one of those first Christians and you are sitting here in your little church, somewhere in Asia Minor, and somebody comes in with a letter from the apostle Paul. Wow! He puts his hands up and reads it to the congregation. Would you like to have a copy of that letter? Oh yes! What would you give for a copy of a letter by Paul? Well, there were no Xerox machines, or anything like that, so the only way you could create copies of these things, was to sit and write them out. What I think was done in some cases, and scholars differ on this, but someone would stand in front of a group of people and carefully read, line by line, the letter and the scribes would sit around the room and copy it out word by word and create copies of Paul's letters. Then they would take a copy of it here and a copy of it there. If you were sitting up there in Philippi, and you had a few of these copies, one of them would have wound up in Corinth, and one in Jerusalem, and one in Alexandria, who knows where they would have finally gone.

Manuscripts all over Middle East

Scholars over the generations have found little fragments of these manuscripts all over the Middle East. There is nothing in the world surprising about that. What would it have been worth to you to have a copy of the manuscript of Matthew's gospel?

Well, as time passed, other Christian writings began to slowly appear. Some of these are among what we would call the Ante Nicene Fathers. In these they often referenced, sometimes they quote lines, sometimes they quote text, there are references to Clement of Alexandria, Clement of Antioch, I think, and others of the early church fathers, who wrote about Christianity, and they would refer to Paul's letters and this gospel and that gospel. So consequently, you could see in the early writings, that they clearly understood which documents belonged to the apostles and which ones might not have.

Collection of Documents

It was the third or fourth generation of Christians who began in various places to collect all of the known apostolic documents into one collection, which came to be called, the New Testament, in our generation.

Holy Scriptures

With all of that said, the first Christians were not without a Bible. They just referred to it by a different term. Since they wrote in Greek, and there were many of them, these documents, they called them 'graphe' and this universally rendered into English as, 'Scriptures.' Now I am not going to bore you with the details, but the collection, that the first Christians called, the 'Holy Scriptures', is what we today call the Old Testament.

Scriptures Were Authoritative

And for the first Christians, the Scriptures were authoritative. That said, we must think a little further about what that means. Now when we speak of the authority of Scripture, we are using a shorthand phrase for something that's a little more complicated.

N.T. Wright observed correctly that "The authority of Scripture is shorthand for God's authority exercised through Scripture." Now when you think about it, it should be apparent that the Bible itself is not the authority, God is the authority. According to Paul, "All authority is from God." He said, "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities for there is no authority except that which God has established." That is the way Paul starts the 13th. chapter of Romans. He said, "The authorities that exist have been established by God." Now when it comes to the Bible, how could we think otherwise. There is no authority except what God has established. So, if the Bible is authoritative, it is because it is made such by God Himself.

All Authority Has Been Given to Jesus

Among the first Christians there was this statement that Jesus made Himself, in His own words, it is right at the end of the book of Matthew and when you consider it in the light of this question of authority, it is really dominating.

Jesus said, in Matthew 28 verse 18, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." I can't do anything with that. It just comes down like a huge cloud and funnels over everything and says, "Hey, there is not any other authority that I don't have, therefore He said, "Go and

make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, even to the very end of the age."

Now when you think this through, this is a stunning claim by Jesus, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me." That's what we're talking about, the authority of Jesus Christ exercised through Scripture.

You can't understand how the first Christians looked at the Bible until you begin to grasp this concept. Jesus' authority is absolute. Now it is plain enough that in the passage of time, Paul saw it precisely that way. He wrote in a letter to the Philippians in chapter 2 verse 5, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: {6} Who, being in the very nature of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, {7} but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. {8} And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross! {9} Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, {10} that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, {11} and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

What a powerful statement that is. That is Philippians 2 and it begins in verse five through verse 11. Verse 10, "That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth" is at peace with the statement that Jesus made "All authority in heaven and earth is given to Me."

How Did the Scriptures Touch the Lives of People?

Okay, I think we have gotten the picture. Now Bishop Wright noted that when John declares, "In the beginning was the Word," that's how the gospel of John begins. He does not reach a climax by saying, "and the Word was written down." No, John says, "The Word became flesh." But when John wrote those words, what did he and his first readers think about what they called the Scriptures? What were they? What influence did they have? How did the Scriptures touch the lives of people?

Well, late in the time that we are talking about, and it may have been the last letter of his life, Paul made a powerful statement about what the first Christians thought about the Scriptures.

In what is generally thought to be the last letter of Paul's life, he wrote to Timothy. Now we have had plenty of time for the church, the Christians, the first Christians to develop their ideas further out, about Scripture, so this is how they saw things.

Paul wrote to Timothy in 2 Timothy 3 and verse 14 and said, "As for you, continue in what you have learned and become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, {15} and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. {16} All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." Now, you may have a person here or there with some weird idea of what Paul would include in that description of "All Scripture," but frankly,

there really is no room for argument on this. What he is talking about is that collection that we call the 'Old Testament.' All the arguments about it, the triviality around it, are exactly that, trivia.

What Can the Scriptures Do?

Look at what these Scriptures can do. They can make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. What Scriptures? There's nothing that Paul could possibly be talking about here, as it will become clear as we go along, and those are the Scriptures of the Old Testament, because from the time that Timothy was an infant, it was a long time before the first document that came into the New Testament was ever written.

Look at what they are good for. It is for "teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." So, the early Christians, the first Christians saw the Old Testament as a document, a set of documents to make you wise for salvation in Christ Jesus, and it could be used for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training.

So, they were authoritative for the first Christians.

Jesus Did Not Come to Abolish the Law or the Prophets

Now with all that said, there was one powerful issue that arose right from the start. You will find it in the sermon on the mount, Jesus is lining the people up because He's going to start saying some things that are going to be very disturbing to many of the people in His audience. He wants to make sure that they understand right up front, what He's talking about.

You will find it in Matthew five and verse 17, "Do not think," Jesus said, "that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets." We are talking about the Scriptures, right? "I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." They are not going away. "I tell you the truth, {18} until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished."

The Written and Oral Law

One of the most important things about what Jesus said here, is that little thing about "smallest letter, and least stroke of a pen." Jesus' audience understood precisely what He was talking about here, because He stepped right into one of the biggest controversies of the day. The difference between the Pharisees, who believed that the Law of Moses came down from Mount Sinai in two media, written and oral, and the Pharisees who did not believe that at all, but believed only in the written Law. Jesus did not say anything about the tradition of the fathers could not pass away, what He said was, "Those things which formed Scripture, what had been written down, were not going anywhere."

This is essential, because He is about to challenge one of the pillars of first century Judaism, which was the 'tradition of the elders,' what they called the 'oral law,' Jesus called it the 'tradition

of the elders'. It's interesting that no New Testament writer ever calls these 'traditions' the 'oral law'. To them, they are nothing more than the 'traditions of the Jews', but Scripture, the written word of God, the jots and the strokes of the pen, and the small letters are considered authoritative by Jesus and the men who told His story.

Now how important is this? Well, there's a jaundra of theology, for some reason, that dismisses the Old Testament. Was that how the first Christians looked at those documents? I remember once when I was living in Abilene, my landlord at the time, I was just a college student, we were discussing this, and he said, "Well, the way I see it is that the Old Testament is like a road map you use to get from here to California and when you get to California you don't need the road map anymore." Well, is that how the first Christians looked at those documents?

Accusations Against Paul

A good place to start might be Paul's letter, because he has been the focus of a lot of misunderstanding on this very issue. An issue had arisen in the Church at Corinth. A handful of people were looking for something to criticize Paul for and they settled on the idea that Paul was in it for the money. Now never mind that Paul never took a dime from anybody in Corinth. What you do has nothing to do with the things they will accuse you of. Anyhow, whatever the case, it provoked Paul to give a response on his part and he starts off with simple logic.

First Corinthians 9 and verse three, "Now this is my defense of those who sit in judgment on me. {4} Don't I have the right to food and drink?" It sounds a little funny at first, but obviously what he is talking about is, "Don't I have the right for food and drink at your expense, {5} "Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as the other apostles and the Lord's brother and Cephas?" In other words, don't we have the right to get some of these things, so we can afford to do them? {6} "Or is it only I and Barnabas, are we the only ones around who have to work for a living? {7} Who serves as soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and doesn't get to eat any of the grapes? Who tends a flock and doesn't drink of the milk?" So far, all that Paul has done is to appeal to simple logic and normal human custom. Hey people, really, what are you going on about? What difference would it make if I had received some help from some of these people.

It Is Written

But realizing that logic doesn't work on some people, Paul reaches out for an authority. What comes to serve as an authority? Paul continues in verse 8 of 1 Corinthians 9, "Now do I say this merely from a human point of view? Doesn't the law say the same thing? {9} For it is written in the Law of Moses." Now take special note of what he just said: "It is written,' not just said, written. Where? In the Law of Moses, "Do not muzzle an ox while it's treading out the grain. Is it about oxen that God is concerned?" Paul asked. {10} "Surely he says this for us, doesn't he? Yes, this was written for us, because when the Plowman plows and the thresher threshes, they ought to do so in the hope of sharing the harvest." Really, don't they get paid for all the work they do somewhere along the way?

Now when you stop and unpack what Paul is saying here, some astonishing things emerge. One, he is citing the Law of Moses, which some people think was abolished at the cross. Two, he says it was written for us. Now mind you, this was written to a church full of Gentiles, non-Jews, more than 20 years after everything was nailed to the cross that was nailed there.

Paul says in verse 10, "It was written for us." Another thing, the original law that he is citing here had little or nothing to do with animal rights. When Paul says, "for us" he means for us human types, in other words, this is an eternal principle of right and wrong, and it has to do with how we relate to one another.

Paul goes on in verse 11 to say this, "If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? {12} If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have more? For we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ. {13} Don't you know that those who work in the temple get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is offered at the altar? {14} In the same way," here is Paul's conclusion, "the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel."

Well, the authority cited to this church for a preacher's right to compensation is what? The Scriptures. It is Deuteronomy 25 verse four, "You shall not muzzle the ox when he treads out the corn." Now candidly, I don't really think that people thought much about it because if you feed your ox adequately before you put him out to work, it doesn't matter whether he has a muzzle on him or not.

It is a proverb and so many of the laws do fall in this category, they are aphorisms, they are proverbs and they are not something somebody does or doesn't do in practice, they are there for a reason so that we will understand from it principles that we can apply it all over the place. The legalist will look at this and assume, "I don't have an ox, so this doesn't apply to me."

The first Christians did not look at it that way, for them these were the Scriptures, the authority of God, expressed in the Scriptures and the appeal to the Scriptures was a constant among these people.

Baptize Uncircumcised Gentiles

One of the first big issues to arise among the first Christians was a question of whether it was okay to baptize uncircumcised Gentiles. Well, they had a big conference in Jerusalem, the whole story is told in the 15th chapter of Acts, and after all the arguments and debates, it was necessary for James to sum everything up.

In Acts 15 and verse 14 James said, "Listen to me: {14} Simon Peter has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself." Step one was to appeal to the facts on the ground, he said, it is a self-evident truth, Peter went down and preached to these people and the Holy Spirit fell on them. What did you expect him to do? Step two was to appeal to authority. The facts on the ground are important, but unless they are

supported by Scripture, they didn't carry the authority. James goes on to say in verse 15, "The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written."

James stands there and quotes from the prophet Amos, {16} "After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it {17} that the remnants of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things' {18} that have been known for ages." Now this is interesting because as you work your way through the New Testament, you'll find every nook and cranny of this document cited again and again and again as Scripture with all the authority of God behind it. And by this document, I mean the Old Testament.

Citations from the Old Testament

Paul's letter to the Romans is really of interest because it is striking when you understand what you have in your hands. It is loaded to the gills with citations from the Old Testament. There are no less than 56 direct citations in a mere 16 chapters and there's another 70 indirect references. You have about eight references to the Old Testament per chapter on average.

Now this has some profound implications about how these people looked at the Scriptures. To them the Scripture, the Old Testament in our terms, carried all the authority of God. Paul for example in the first chapter, of the book of Romans, and verse 16 had this to say, "I'm not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, it is the power of God unto salvation, to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and to the Greek, {17} For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith as it is written, "The just shall live by faith." This is the citation, word for word, right from the prophet Habakkuk.

It is interesting, if you want to do quick study on this one, just look at your concordance for the words "it is written" in the New Testament. You'll be surprised how much you find.

The Jews Have Been Entrusted with the Old Testament Scriptures

In Romans three and verse one. Paul says, "What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? {2} Much in every way! First, they have been entrusted with the very words of God." Wow think about that. In fact, when it comes right down to it, that book we call the Old Testament is what has been preserved down through generation after generation by, guess who? The Jews! And so, it was as they came down to this point in time, Paul must stand up and recognize that.

Now Paul addresses a problem that a lot of people have, and he said in verse 3, "What if some did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God's faithfulness? {4} No way! Let God be true, and every man is a liar. As it is written, "So that you may be proven right when you speak and prevail when you judge." This is a direct citation from Psalms 51.

Now what is interesting when you read along in Romans in particular, Paul assumes a familiarity with Scriptures on the part of his readers and all he needs to say is "It is written." He doesn't tell

you which prophet, which psalm, or any reference, he just went right on and the people would sit there and sagely nod their heads and say, "That is right, it is written there."

In Romans three verse nine, Paul says this, "What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? No! We have already made the charge, that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. {10} As it is written, "There is none righteous, not one. There is no one that understands, no one seeks God, {12} All have turned away, they have become worthless, there is no one that does good, not even one." These are citations from the 14th and the 53rd Psalms.

Paul takes a very pessimistic view of things, but what Paul is saying here is, this is as true now as it was when David wrote the words. The list that follows here includes scattered citations from the Psalms and Isaiah.

In Romans three and verse 13, Paul said, "Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit." "The poison of vipers is in their lips. {14} Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness, {15} Their feet are swift to shed blood, {16} ruin and misery mark their ways, {17} and the way of peace they do not know." There is no fear of God before their eyes."

So, if the first Christians had a Bible, would it be fair to say, it was obviously that collection of books that we call the Old Testament? It is fascinating as you come to realize how many of what we think are New Testament concepts arise naturally from the Old Testament and so much so that all Paul must do is say "It is written" and he salts it all the way through the documents that he created.

So, I return to my opening question: What did the first Christians believe about the Bible? They believed in the Authority of Scripture, and by that they meant, God's authority exercised through Scripture.

The late Ronald L. Dart was a Christian evangelist whose teachings still inspire thousands of people around the world. His legacy spans decades. For more information about the teachings of Ronald L. Dart, visit RLDEA.com where you will find booklets, articles, sermons, Bible studies, and books by Mr. Dart.

Discussion Questions

1. Like Mr. Dart points out, Paul tells Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:16, that all "Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness." All they had is what we now call the Old Testament. Do you ever wonder what the apostles and Paul would think now that their epistles and letters are now considered the same and now make up our Bible?
2. If the Old Testament was so vital and important for the first Christians, don't you think that it still is for us?

3. Have you ever encountered people that think that the Old Testament is outdated, and the New Testament is what is more important in our time?
4. Can you have one without the other? Or are the Old and New Testaments actually one book like a man and woman who become one when they are married?
5. Do you read more out of one testament over the other?
6. Can you think of other Old Testament references that are found in the New Testament?
7. Do you believe in the Authority of Scripture?
8. Have you ever wondered what it would be like if you weren't able to have the Bible in your own language and instead had to rely on only hearing it once a week?
9. Do you find that the Bible is like a 'living' thing? In other words, it still teaches and is applicable for us today thousands of years after the last stroke of a pen.
10. Do you ever wonder if God will add more books to the Bible after Jesus' return?