



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 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 actually being written in the years between about AD 55 and AD 70. To the first Christians, well, these were the written testimonies and letters of the apostles. We know about when they were being written, because scholars have dated the first of the writings to the mid 50s and *not one* of the New Testament documents show any sign that the Temple had been destroyed (AD 70). And an event that big would have found some expression somewhere in those documents.

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 stands up and reads it to the congregation. Would you like to have a copy of that? Oh, my! 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 were to sit and write them out.

What I think was done in some cases (scholars will differ on this) but someone would stand in front of a group of people, and they would carefully read, line by line, the letter. And the scribes sitting around the room would copy it out, word by word, and create copies of Paul's letters. And then they would take a copy of it here and a copy of it there. If you were sitting up in Philippi, and you had a few of these copies...one of them wound up in down in Corinth, another of them one wound up clean down in Jerusalem, another one wound up in Alexandria. Who knows where they all finally went and where they all were scattered? Scholars over the generations have found little fragments of these manuscripts all over the Middle East. Nothing in the world surprising about that. I mean, 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. These are among what we would call the "Ante-Nicene Fathers". In these they often referenced (sometimes they quote lines, sometimes they quote bits of text) but there are references by Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, I think, and others of the early church fathers, who wrote about Christianity. And they would refer to Paul's letters and they'd refer to this gospel and that gospel. And so, consequently, you could see in their early writings that they clearly understood which documents belonged to the apostles and which ones might not have. It was the third or fourth generation of Christians who began in various places to collect all the known apostolic documents into one collection, which came to be called "the New Testament" in our generation.

Now, 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 *graphé* [γραφή, Strong's G1124]. And this is 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" was what we today call "the Old Testament". And for the first Christians, the Scriptures were authoritative.

That said, we have to 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 (with that word “all”, Paul’s putting everything in there) is from God.

Romans 13

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¹ Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established.

² The authorities that exist have been established by God.

That is the way he 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. Then, among the first Christians, there was this statement that Jesus made himself, in his own words. It’s 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, Matthew 28, verse 18:

Matthew 28

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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 hovers over everything and says, “Hey, there isn’t any other authority that I don’t have.”

Matthew 28

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¹⁹ “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, 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*.” Thus we are 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:

Philippians 2

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⁵ Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

⁶ Who, being in very nature 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.

Man, what a powerful statement that is! That's Philippians 2, begins in verse five and runs through 11. And that tenth verse, "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." Okay, I think we've got that picture. Now, Bishop Wright noted that:

When John declares that "in the beginning was the word," [*that's how the Gospel of John begins*] he does not reach a climax with "and the word was written down" but "and the word became flesh."

Scripture and the Authority of God: How to Read the Bible Today

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 they touch the lives of people? Well, late in the time that we are talking about, in what 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 first Christians—to develop their ideas further out about Scripture. So this is how they saw things. Paul wrote to him and said:

2 Timothy 3

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- ¹⁴ But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have 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,
¹⁷ so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Now, you may have a person here and there with some weird idea of what Paul would include in that description "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.

Look at what these Scriptures are able to do. They are able to make you "wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." What Scriptures? There's nothing he could possibly be talking about here (as 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, so 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 set of documents that could make you wise for salvation in Christ Jesus and could be used for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training. So they were *authoritative* for the first Christians.

Now, all that said, there was one powerful issue that arose right from the start. You find it in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is lining people up here, because he’s going to start saying some things that are going to be very disturbing to many of the people in his audience, and he wants them to be sure they understand, right up front, what he’s talking about. You’ll find it in Matthew 5, verse 17:

Matthew 5

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¹⁷ “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets [*Aha! We’re talking about the Scriptures, right? You bet.*]; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. [*They are not going away.*]

¹⁸ I tell you the truth, 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.”

Now, one of the most important things about what he said here is that little thing about “smallest letter”, and “least stroke of a pen”. His audience understood *precisely* what he was talking about here, because he stepped right into one of the big 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 Sadducees, who did not believe that at all but believed only in the *written* Law. Jesus did not say that “anything out of 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 then put on one side and 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, the dots 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 genre of theology that, for some reason, 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. When you get to California you don’t need the road map any more.” Well, was that how the first Christians looked at those documents?

A good place to start might be Paul’s letter, because he has been the focus of an awful 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 a response on his part. And he starts off with simple logic. 1 Corinthians 9, verse 3:

1 Corinthians 9

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³ This is my defense to those who sit in judgment on me.

⁴ Don’t we 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?”

1 Corinthians 9

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⁵ Don’t we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord’s brothers and Cephas?

In other words, “Don’t we have the right to get some stuff on these things so we can afford to do them?”

1 Corinthians 9

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⁶ Or is it only I and Barnabas who must work for a living?

⁷ Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk?

So far, all he’s done is appeal to simple logic and appeal to normal human custom. “Hey people, really, what are you on about, here? What difference would it make if I *had* received some help from some of these people?” But, realizing that logic doesn’t work on some people, Paul reaches out for an authority. What comes to serve as his authority? Well, in verse 8 he continues:

1 Corinthians 9

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⁸ 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.”

1 Corinthians 9

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⁹ [...] “Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.” Is it about oxen that God is concerned?

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 in the harvest.

You know, really, don’t they get paid for all the work they do somewhere along the line? Now, when you stop and unpack what Paul is saying here, some really 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, this was written to a church full of Gentiles—not Jews—more than 20 years after everything was nailed to the cross that was nailed there. He says 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:

1 Corinthians 9

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¹¹ 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 it all the more?

¹³ But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ. 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 on the altar?

¹⁴ In the same way [*and here is Paul's conclusion*], the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel.

Well, well. So the authority cited to this church for a preacher's right to compensation is what? The Scriptures. It's Deuteronomy 25, verse four:

Deuteronomy 25

AKJV

⁴ 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 even put him out there, it doesn't matter whether he's got a muzzle on or not. It's a proverb, and so many of the laws do fall in this category. They are aphorisms. They are proverbs. They aren't 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 all over the place.

Now, the legalist will look at this and assume, "Oh, I don't have an ox. Doesn't apply to me." But 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.

One of the first *really* big issues to arise among the first Christians was a question of whether or not 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 argument and all the debate, it was necessary for James to sum everything up. And he said:

Acts 15

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¹³ [...] "Brothers, listen to me.

¹⁴ Simon 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 says, "It's a self-evident truth. Peter goes down to preach to these people and the Holy Spirit fell on them. What do you expect him to do?" But 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:

Acts 15

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¹⁵ The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:

And James stands there and quotes from the prophet Amos [**Amos 9:11–12**]:

Acts 15

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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 remnant 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 really 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.) Paul's letter to the Romans is really of interest because (and it's *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 72 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 Scripture. To them, 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 had this to say:

Romans 1

AKJV

- 16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God to salvation to every one that believes; to the Jew first, and also 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.

That's a citation, word for word, right from the prophet Habakkuk [**Habakkuk 2:4**]. You'll find it's really interesting, if you want to do quickie on this one, just take a look at your concordance for the words “it is written” in the New Testament, and you'll be surprised how much you find. That one from Habakkuk; and in Romans 3, verse 1, Paul says:

Romans 3

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- 1 What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision?
2 Much in every way! First of all, 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 was 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 has to stand up and recognize that. Now, he addresses a problem that a lot of people have in their mind. He says:

Romans 3

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- 3 What if some did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God's faithfulness?
4 Not at all! Let God be true, and every man a liar. As it is written:
“So that you may be proved right when you speak
and prevail when you judge.”

That's a direct citation from the 51st Psalm [**Psalm 51:4**].

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, doesn't tell you which psalm, or give you any of that kind of stuff. He goes barreling right on through, and people sit there and sagely nod their heads and say, "Yeah, that's right. It is written there." So then in Romans 3, verse 9, he says this:

Romans 3

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⁹ What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin.

¹⁰ As it is written: [*Here we go again.*]

“There is no one righteous, not even one;

¹¹ there is no one who understands,
no one who seeks God.

¹² All have turned away,
they have together become worthless;
there is no one who does good,
not even one.”

These are citations from the 14th and the 53rd Psalms [**Psalm 14:1–3; 53:1–3**]... which 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 litany that follows here includes scattered citations from the Psalms and Isaiah. In Romans 3, verse 13, he said:

Romans 3

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¹³ “Their throats are open graves;
their tongues practice deceit.” [**Psalm 5:9**]

“The poison of vipers is on their lips.” [**Psalm 140:3**]

¹⁴ “Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.” [**Psalm 10:7**]

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.” [**Isaiah 59:7–8**]

¹⁸ “There is no fear of God before their eyes.” [**Psalm 36:1**]

So, if the first Christians had a Bible, would it be fair to say it was pretty obviously that collection of books we call the Old Testament? And it's 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 has to do is say, “It's written”. And he salts it all the way through the documents he creates.

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.

Until next time, I'm Ronald Dart.

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