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Session Two

HOW OUR BIBLE CAME TO BE

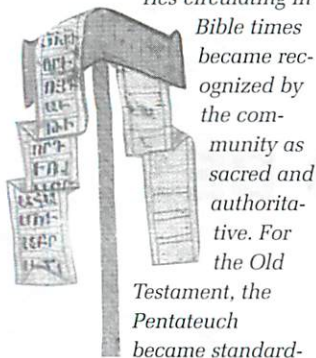
*The seas of my behavior constantly rock me.
I am tossed by the enemy who creates storms.
Good Captain, be my shelter.*

Mesrob Mashdotz (c.400 A.D.)



Did You Know?

Canonization is the process by which the scrolls and stories circulating in



Bible times became recognized by the community as sacred and authoritative. For the Old

Testament, the Pentateuch became standard-

ized fairly quickly – probably during the 5th century BC exile of the Jews to Babylon during which time it was so important to have a shared sacred text. By the 1st century AD, the books of the Hebrew Bible were set. Criteria centered on antiquity and moral character of contents.

How It All Began

Christians believe that the writers of the Biblical books were inspired by God to write what they did, and that the Bible therefore is a holy book containing God's message for His people, God's will for His people, and God's promise of a Savior to His people.

The Bible is more than 3000 years old, and it began as oral tradition: stories, songs, poems and rules for good living passed down by word of mouth from one generation of the Hebrew or Jewish people to the next generation. As time went on, these oral traditions began to be written down so they would not be forgotten. Probably one of the earliest pieces to be written down is the Song of Deborah, found in *Judges 5:1-3*. Take a moment to read this song in your Bible now.

God's Chosen People

God could have selected any of the peoples of the ancient world to be His chosen people. The intelligent Greeks, the gifted and powerful Phoenicians, the highly-advanced Egyptians—why not one of them, instead of the nomadic and relatively poor Hebrews? This question is not one we can answer. We only know what God did, and that was to name the Hebrews as His chosen people.

So as more and more oral traditions were being written down, the religious leaders of the Hebrews knew they had an important task because of their special role in God's plan. They began to collect the writings that were being produced. From about 1150 B.C. to 90 A.D. these writings—with corrections, additions, and deletions along the way—were gathered, and they form the Old Testament that we know today.

Who Were the Bible's Writers?

The question of authorship is another that we often cannot answer. We simply don't know who the writers of many Biblical books actually were. Some books certainly were written by the people whose names are on them as authors. But in the ancient world, standards of authorship were not the same as they are in our day and time.

For instance, today someone might study the writings of Saint Gregory of Nareg. Then that person might write a book called "The Message of Saint Gregory for Today's World." Nothing wrong with that—good idea, in fact. But in the ancient world, a writer who studied Saint Gregory's work might honor the saint by writing a similar book and simply calling it "The Writings of Saint Gregory of Nareg." For the ancient peoples, nothing was wrong with that, either.

And sometimes a person's name was put on a book as its author because that person was a major source for the material or mode of thought presented in the book. Again, this was fairly standard practice in the time the Bible was being written.

The Bible is True

Christians believe that there are no internal contradictions in the Bible, and no formal errors. The Bible truly and authentically represents the relationship between God and humankind. But this does not mean that every single word of the Bible is to be taken literally. The writers of Scripture were constrained by their own human knowledge and the limited understanding of their times. For example, in the Book of Jonah (3:3) we read that "Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth." This is the writer's deliberate exaggeration to show the prominence of Nineveh. What actual city is or has ever been so big that it would take three days to get across it?

Another kind of example appears in the Book of Daniel, where Belshazzar is described as a king, and the son of Nebuchadnezzar. In fact, he was the son of Nabonidus and never did become king.

So, in proclaiming the divine inspiration of Holy Scripture, the Church does not deny that a reader will find some insignificant errors of fact. There are also some intentionally exaggerated pieces of writing such as the Jonah passage. This doesn't change the essential and life-giving Truth of the Bible and its eternal message, presented in various ways in the books of the Bible but always authentically the word of God.

"Breathed By God": Asdvadzashoonch

The word "breathing" makes us think of the essence of life—it's the process which enables us to live. So the Armenian name for the Bible, *Asdvadzashoonch*, which is a translation of the expression used in 2 Timothy 3:16, reminds us that God's word is life for us. It also tells us how close this word is to God. It is His very breathing, and He gives it to us.

The name is especially apt because the phrase "Word of God" means not only the written word. It also refers to Jesus Christ. Our loving Creator gives us not only the word of His own breathing but also His only Son.

The people of Armenia in the fifth century knew the wonderful gifts God had given them. They had priests and other leaders who exemplified God's love; they worshipped in beautiful churches. But there was one important thing they

Word Watch

Canon (Hebrew:

kaneh – reed;

Greek: *kanon* – reed

which were units of

measure); the

authoritative list of

books in the Old

and New

Testaments.

Asdvadzashoonch (lit: Arm:

"breathed by God"); The

Armenian expression for the

Bible which comes directly from

Scripture. (2 Timothy 3:16)



The Armenian Angle

The translation of the Bible into Armenian has been called the “queen of all translations”



(by the French scholar La Crosse) for its power and beauty. The frenzy

of translating activity in the 5th century marked those years as the “Golden Age” or “Vosgetar” in Armenian (lit: “golden century”) and many very valuable ancient documents have been preserved only in the classical Armenian!

did not have. They could not read the words of Scripture in their own language; in church they heard the Bible read in Syriac or Greek and then roughly translated. There was no Armenian alphabet, and thus no possibility of a Bible written in Armenian.

Saints Sahag and Mesrob

Many people, especially clergy, knew how important it was to find a way of translating the Bible and other holy books so that people could hear and read the words in their own language. But it was a former keeper of royal documents named Mashtotz who took the task on himself. At the rather late age of forty, he was ordained a priest with the blessing of his good friend Catholicos Sahag, and took the priestly name of Mesrob.

Over the next several years, through arduous labor and many promising starts that ended in disappointment, Mesrob developed an excellent alphabet. But the letters were not quite sufficient to write all the words and sounds that existed in Armenian. Mesrob tried everything he knew, even traveling to other countries to consult with scholars.

Then one day, in the year 406, God rewarded Mesrob's efforts and patience with a vision of the missing letters. Now he had 36 all together (the last two were added centuries later for a total of 38), and they sufficed to write any word in his beloved Armenian language. He couldn't wait to try them out. So he opened the Bible to the first verse of the Book of Proverbs—verses which expressed so well the reason for all his hard work. Mesrob wrote out in Armenian letters, “To know wisdom and instruction, to perceive the words of understanding.” Yes! All the letters and sounds were there. The alphabet “worked”!

The next twenty-five years were filled with more labor, as Mesrob and Catholicos Sahag worked with teams of scholars to translate first the Bible and then the writings of many saints. They also sent out teams to teach people how to read, so that every Armenian could benefit from God's word in this new, personal way of reading it themselves. Mesrob traveled to many parts of the country to help with the teaching and to correct any errors in people's understanding.

The saint was now advanced in years. We might think that Mesrob retired to a monastery in later life, satisfied that his work for God and country were done. But Mesrob took very seriously the command that Jesus gives to His disciples at the end of Matthew's Gospel: “Go and make disciples of all nations.” Mesrob wanted all people, in whatever countries they inhabited, to have the blessing of hearing and reading God's word in their own languages. So when Church lead-

ers in Albania and Georgia asked him to come and help develop their alphabets, he willingly did so.

A Bible Passage to Learn

“Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.”

(Matthew 28:19-20).

- These are words of Jesus Christ to His disciples after He rose from the dead and before He ascended to heaven. What do you think He meant by telling them to teach others “all that I have commanded you”? What did He mean by “to the close of the age”?
- How did Saint Mesrob fulfill the commands of Jesus Christ?
- What does it mean to “make disciples of all nations”? Does it refer only to people in other countries? How might the command apply to us and our lives here and now?

Looking In

The very first words written in Armenian were from the Bible.

Biblical metaphors, phraseology, and stories influenced Armenian literature until the late 19th century!

Imagine for a minute that you learned to read using only the Bible as a text. Do you think this would influence how you think? Form sentences? Write stories?



Quick Quiz #2

- ① We know the author of each book of the Bible because it is included in the book.

☐ T ☐ F

- ② Every word of the Bible is meant to be taken as literal truth.

☐ T ☐ F

- ③ Asdvadzashoonch means

- ④ to ⑤ What are the two meanings of the term "Word of God?"

- ⑥ When stories are passed down by word of mouth from one generation to the next, it is called

- ⑦ After he invented the Armenian alphabet, St. Mesrob helped 2 countries develop an alphabet. Name one

- ⑧ to ⑩ Matching

_____ His name was Mashdotz

_____ He was ordained at the age of 40.

_____ He was a Catholicos.

A St. Sahag

B St. Mesrob