

## Introduction to the Bible.

When we try to study the bible, we also need to approach it in its context - an ancient religious document reflecting the development of religious instinct in somewhat primitive times. At first sight this book or better, these books - the bible - will seem to have a lot in common with similar religious documents from the ancient world, particularly from the mediterranean world and the ancient near east. We will see later parallel creation accounts from neighbouring cultures, particularly Mesopotamian.

A brief overview of religious expression in human history uncovers a few categories that we could do well to keep in mind.

Firstly a primitive form of religion could be called Animism. This system saw a kind of personal will or life force running through all creation, trees, rivers, mountains and so forth. A second form of primitive religion is Polytheism, namely worship of a plurality of gods. This was the religion of the Graeco-Roman culture. Polytheism could be seen as a personification of the conflicting powers and wonders of nature. Thirdly Pantheism was a religious view that identified the totality of things with God. We tend to associate this with oriental cultures. This has always been an attractive form of religion for many people. The religious goal of the Pantheist is an absorption into or union with the deity however perceived.

Fourthly Deism is a religious view that would keep God absolutely distinct from creation. God sets things in motion and then bows out and has nothing further to do with creation. Fifthly and finally we come to the religious system of the bible, [and also of Islam] and that is Theism. It is strictly monotheistic and so the opposite of Polytheism. Theism proclaims that God is both immanent and transcendent. God is much more involved in creation than the very detached god of the deist.

The question of the existence of God is one of the great preoccupations of human beings in every age and especially in our own. Many, many people have sought God in any of the systems outlined above. The opposite of Theism is known as Atheism. Atheism involves the denial of a supernatural supreme being or creator who could be the object of human worship. Atheism is stronger than Agnosticism which simply holds that if there is a God we just cannot know anything about such a being.

The Atheist bases his or her conviction on the acknowledged impossibility of 'proving' the existence of God. The difficulty arises

acutely in a scientific age where scientist have proved initially with the help of telescopes that the earth revolves around the sun or that an atom which is invisible consists of a nucleus with electrons orbiting around it. Unbelievers generally hold that the universe is sufficient to itself and as Pierre Laplace famously put it when Napoleon questioned him about the omission of God from his system, 'I have no need of that hypothesis'.

Now we turn to the sacred book or books of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. These books are a consistent witness to the reality of God unfolding over many centuries of human life. There are 24 books in all in the Hebrew version of the Bible. This is known as the 'canon' of scripture and it was fixed by the rabbis at the Synod of Jamnia in AD 90. It is significant that Christian churches accept this arrangement. The Greek Septuagint which was compiled in Alexandria in Egypt in about 50 BC contains some additional books, such as the Book of Wisdom and Ecclesiasticus and these are known as 'The Apocrypha' or 'Deuterocanonical Books'. The Catholic Church regards them as authentic but Protestant churches merely accept them as 'edifying reading'. The Hebrew can have a threefold division; the Law or the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings. The first five books are known as the Pentateuch, or scrolls ie, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The prophets are sometimes divided into two classes, the Former and the Latter. In this arrangement what we normally refer to as historical books are called 'Former Prophets'. They are certainly written from the prophetic point of view. The Pentateuch too, though we call it the Torah also sets out to present a sacred history of the chosen people. The Writings or the Ketubim, covers the remainder, namely the Psalms, Job and shorter books such as Ecclesiastes or Qoheleth.

We may offer the following divisions of themes within the **Pentateuch**; Genesis 1-11 gives us the primeval history including two accounts of creation.

Chapters 12-50 [the end] deals with the Patriarchal Narratives.

**Exodus** treats of the deliverance of the people from Egypt under the leadership of Moses. Leviticus contains mostly legal codes.

**Numbers** deals with Law also together with ritual and the wilderness wanderings

**Deuteronomy** finally purports to be a long address by Moses divided into three sections. We will now turn to the Primeval History as we find it in Genesis chapters 1-11. Then I will treat of the Patriarchal

Narratives which deal with the promises made by God to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Next I will give an account of the Exodus experience under Moses. After that it will be necessary to analyse the composition and make up of the bible itself using the insights of what is known as Form Criticism. Finally I will illustrate the biblical narratives from extra biblical material, such as the Babylonian creation stories and the Gilgamesh Epic.