

The Bible in the Armenian Church *by Fr. Vazken Movsesian*

To understand the Bible, one must first understand the Church. Just as a psychologist, in studying a child's behavior, will examine the environment and the various circumstances in which that child developed, we too must review the conditions under which the Bible evolved. In our quest to understand the Bible, we will study and examine:

- * The Armenian Church's understanding of the Bible;
- * The Church, Tradition, and the Bible;
- * The evolution of the Bible.

In Armenian, we refer to the Bible as Asdvadzashoonch, i.e., the "Breath of God." The Armenian Church believes that the Bible is God-inspired. Even more, as the word Asdvadzashoonch implies, the Armenian Church attaches great importance to the Bible and does not view it as just another book. However, the Armenian Church does not teach that the Bible is the ultimate authority or voice of God. We cannot merely hold up the Bible and say this is it! There is Holy Tradition from which the Bible itself evolved.

Here in America, the constitutional guarantee for freedom of religion has given rise to many philosophies under the guise of a "church." It might be easy to conclude that one can receive the power and authority to establish a church from the Bible. In fact, we have heard groups exclaim that if something is non-Biblical, it is not true or relevant or does not belong in the Church. Especially among fundamentalist Christians, the Bible is seen as the final authority on questions of faith. Unfortunately, people with this view are operating under the common misconception that the Church is a creation of the Bible.

It is important to keep in mind that this holy book did not fall from heaven. God did not give us a Bible to define our faith. God gave us something far more valuable than printed words. God gave us His most sacred gift, His Son, Jesus Christ. In His turn, Christ did not give us the Bible. (As far as we know, Jesus never authored any written document.) Christ gave us His most precious Body, the Holy Church. It was the Church, who after centuries of thought and development gave us the book we call the Bible.

BIBLICAL ANATOMY

The Bible is made up of two major sections: the Old Testament and the New Testament. In Orthodox Christianity, the Old Testament is seen through the New Testament. That is, for Christians, the New Testament is the fulfillment of God's promise as made in the Old Testament. In the Armenian Church, we sing a special hymn on the Feast of the Holy Translators of the Bible called Vork Zartaretzin. The English translation of this hymn reads:

“O, You who masterfully bedecked the wisdom of the living letters to lead the flock of the New Israel...”

The key words here are the "New Israel." For, in fact, the concept of Israel is from the Old Testament. It is the people to whom God entrusted His covenant. The New Israel is the Christian Church, those who have accepted the New Covenant. The concept of the "New Israel" is further illustrated in a hymn of the baptism service:

“We have been called the New Israel in Christ...”

Appropriately, this hymn is sung immediately following a person's formal admittance into the Church.

The New Testament or New Covenant is the testimony about our Lord Jesus Christ. The New Testament consists of four Gospels, the Book of Acts, twenty-one letters and one apocalyptic book call the Revelation of St. John. Let us look at a time line, beginning with Pentecost, when according to the book of Acts (2:1ff) the Holy Spirit descended upon the Apostles and the Church was born.

The Apostles were the first Christian community, the first Christian Church. They had no "Bible." Instruction in the faith was by word of mouth. First there was the Church and as yet there was no Bible. The Gospel or the "Good News" which they preached was that Christ had risen. For millennia, people had come and gone, yet, no one had ever conquered death. This was an earth-shaking experience in the lives of the Apostles. Their mission was to spread the Good News-Christ had risen giving an opportunity for all humankind to share in this new life. This was the first Gospel and it was transmitted orally. We need only read Acts 1:22 and 1 Corinthians 15:12 ff to see this.

The first Christians felt that Christ's return would be imminent. That is, they felt that the Second Coming of Christ was right around the corner and they lived their lives accordingly. (See I Thessalonians 4:13-18.) As time went on, the Apostles expanded their mission to various parts of the world. New Christian communities sprouted. Each of these communities had this understanding of an imminent end. As time went on, problems arose in the communities-daily problems. The communities were faced with questions of, "Should we obey the local authorities if Christ is due back any day?" Or, "Is it proper for us to marry, if Christ will be returning soon?" Or, "What will happen to all those who die before Christ returns?" These are all legitimate questions for a group of people who harbored a notion of an imminent end.

To address these problems, the Apostles, now scattered throughout the known world, wrote responses to the communities, giving specific instructions on how to conduct their lives until Christ returned. Among the most popular letters were those of the apostle Paul. The books in the New Testament which follow the Gospels are nothing more than the letters St. Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, Corinth, Thessalonica, Ephesus, and so on. The first of these letters (I Thessalonians) was written in the 40's.

The Church existed without a bible. The Church had its worship services, which included partaking of the Holy Eucharist, reading psalms or prophetic literature of the Old Testament, and prayer. The letters they received (e.g. from the apostle Paul), were read during the gathering of the faithful. These letters, which eventually became part of the Bible, were written for the sole use of the Church.

As time went on, and Christ had not yet returned, further problems developed. For one, all the eyewitnesses to Christ's life on Earth were passing away. Who would convey the stories of Christ's life to future generations? Furthermore, the communities and churches were asking about the details of Christ's life, i.e. His birth, His upbringing, whether or not He was baptized, and so on. For this reason, the Gospels were written.

The Gospels are the narrative account of our Lord's life. Again, the point has to be made that they were written for the sole use of the Christian Church. The Church demanded it, and, therefore, they were produced. The Gospels according to St. Matthew, St. Mark, and St. Luke, including the Book of Acts, (called the synoptic gospels) were written between 60 and 80 AD. The Gospel according to St. John was written sometime later. Although these books were written, they had not yet been put into the form of a "bible."

OTHER BOOKS

Toward the end of the second century AD, there were all sorts of books existing in the Christian communities. For example, there was the Gospel of Thomas, or, as the author called his book, "The Secret Words Which Jesus the Living Spoke and Jude Thomas Wrote Down." This book is a compilation of 118 different sayings attributed to Jesus. It might be thought of as a more complete Sermon on the Mount. Some of the passages in this book are also found in the Gospels of St. Matthew and St. Luke. There was also a book called the "Gospel of the Infancy of Jesus Christ." It is one of the more fascinating books of what is called the New Testament "apocrypha" or "hidden books." It was received by the Gnostics in the second century. This book is a compilation of stories relating to the young Jesus. Many of these stories seem to be derived from events and occurrences in the synoptic Gospels. One story relates how Jesus, while still in the cradle looks up at his mother and says, "Mary, I am the Son of God." Another story is generated from the account of the anointing of Jesus by Mary Magdalene. The story claims an old lady kept Jesus' navel string in an alabaster box of old oil of spikenard. It was out of this box that Mary took the oil to anoint Jesus. Still another story relates how Jesus and some other young boys were molding clay figures of animals. Upon Jesus' command, the clay figures begin to walk and fly. The entire book is filled with miraculous stories of this nature.

Some other books of this genre include, The Gospel of Nicodemus, The Gospel of Peter, the Epistle of Jesus Christ and Abgarus the King of Edessa. So, the early Church Fathers had before them many books relating in some fashion or form to the Lord Jesus Christ. After studying these books and sifting through their content they had to decide which ones were authentic and which were fictitious and/or representative a heretical view [editor's note: There were other books which were considered authentic and holy but still not part of the Bible's Canon, e.g. 1 Clement, etc. -WDG]. It was the Church Fathers who decided what was to be considered "The Bible," designating them as scriptural canon. In canon 85 of the "Canons of the Holy and Renowned Apostles" there is a list of all the books which are to be considered sacred and to be read in the Church. All of the books that are in The Bible as we know it today are in this list, except the "Book of Revelation." It was in 419 AD, at the Regional Council held in Carthage that the Book of Revelation was accepted as being canonical.

Meanwhile, during the fifth century a monumental task was underway in Armenia. Until then, the scriptures were read in Greek in the Armenian

churches. Sts. Sahag and Mesrob embarked upon the task of translating the Bible into Armenian. St. Mesrob found the necessary tool for doing this with the invention of the Armenian alphabet. The Armenian translation of the Bible has been referred to as the "Queen of Translations," because of its accuracy and style of perfection.

PROTESTANT REVISION

A major change in the Bible took place at the time of the Protestant Reformation, when Martin Luther, in 1534 published his German Bible which had a number of books separated from the Bible. These books, which Luther excluded on his own, he referred to as the Apocrypha. As a preface to the Apocrypha, Luther wrote, "Apocrypha, that is, books which are not held equal to the sacred Scriptures, and nevertheless are useful and good to read." Of course, the Orthodox Church, as well as the Roman Catholic Church, continue to regard these books as canonical. One of the sections which was separated is from the third chapter of the Book of Daniel, known as The Song of the Three. This section is read in the Armenian Church on Easter Eve and Theophany Eve. Among the books that were separated is the Book of Maccabees, where we see the Jews praying over the dead and expounding on life after death. This can be compared with the Armenian Church's requiem service (hokehankist). These "apocryphal" books are a part of our Tradition and, unfortunately, are sometimes overlooked.

LEATHER BOUND BIBLES

Today, we have a finished copy of the Bible, all nicely printed and available virtually anywhere. What is the role and use of The Bible for us, as members of the Armenian Church? Where does the Bible fit-in in the life of the Armenian Church and the Armenian Christian? Our Armenian Church is often criticized for not stressing the Bible, or for not emphasizing the Bible enough. When we hear these complaints, we must always keep in mind that the Bible is the product of the Church!

Beyond a doubt, our Armenian Church is one of the most biblical Churches. Every part of our liturgies, hymns, and services can be paralleled with the Bible. However, the Bible is not the only article of faith our Church has to offer, we have Holy Tradition. These are practices of the Church which were established before the Bible was written. As St. John writes in his Gospel, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the

disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name." (John 20:30-31) Moreover, St. Paul writes, "So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter." (2 Thessalonians 2:15) It is apparent that there was an oral tradition which was equally as valid as the written one. Where do we learn about this Tradition? At the same place we learn about the Bible - at the Church!

If we open the Armenian Church lectionary for the Feast of the Holy Translators, we find the Gospel reading is from Matthew 7:6, "Do not give dogs what is holy, do not throw you pearls before swine; they will only trample on them and turn and tear you to pieces." Perhaps our forefathers had a reason for instructing us with this passage, and, I suspect, a very good reason.

When we speak of the Bible in the Armenian Church, we speak of the Breath of God. The early Church Fathers, did not intend the Bible-the Breath of God-to be an evangelical or inspirational tool outside the Church. The accessibility of a Bible to us is a phenomenon of only the past few centuries, from the time of the printing press. Even today, in our churches, the Bible, especially the Gospels, is considered sacred. Be it Deacon or Priest, whoever handles the Gospel in the Church, never directly touches the Holy Book, but uses a cloth to hold it. Because the Church produced the Bible, the Church, ultimately, is the entity which gives authority to the Bible. And, in the same light, only in the Church can the Bible be interpreted with authority.

The Bible is not something which God gave directly to us. No, it evolved through time. It is the complication of the writings and oral traditions of year upon year, century upon century. We as the living Armenian Church today, should never forget that in terms of historical reality, our Church, along with its rich Tradition existed long before the Bible was compiled. This statement does not diminish the importance of the Bible in the Church, only clarifies its place within Tradition.

Yes, the Armenian Church does believe the Holy Scriptures are inspired by God. We even make note of this every Sunday when in the Creed we recite, "We believe also in the Holy Spirit, ... who spoke in the law and in the prophets and in the Gospels." However, we must keep it in perspective and view it in accordance with and in acknowledgment of the Holy Tradition of the Church.

The Bible is a part of the Holy Tradition of the Church. Although the Bible holds a certain supremacy in this Holy Tradition, we must remember

that if we are to speak about the Bible, we must also speak about liturgical and sacramental life, the ecumenical councils, the writings of the Church Fathers, the lives of the saints, canon law, music, and architecture. All of these are sources of faith and very much a part of Holy Tradition. As the living Armenian Church today, we must not only share in the Bible, but in the entirety of Holy Tradition.