

How the Bible Came to Us - #5
Christianity and the Christian Bible Become “Official”

1. During the early years of Christianity, it was first a “tolerated” religion and then a “persecuted” religion. At the same time, Judaism went from being a tolerated, national religion to being the despised religion of a homeless people. Thus, for a while, Christianity and Judaism were more or less equal in their status. Their inspired writings had no legal status.
2. The Emperor “followed” the pagan Greco-Roman religion. It consisted of a polytheistic religion in which worship was given to many different gods. Large sums of money were spent building temples to a favorite “god,” and even the Emperor was regarded as a “god.”
3. During that time, a very interesting dialogue took place between Justin Martyr and a Jewish teacher by the name of Trypho. It was presented in the form of a dialogue. Justin Martyr, the Christian, believed the Septuagint was the more authoritative form of the Old Testament. Trypho, the Jew, of course, believed it was the Hebrew Bible. The very fact that such a discussion could take place revealed the more or less equal status that those two religious traditions held.
4. But, despite that, Judaism, having been the official religion of a nation, was still regarded by the Romans as being superior. Between A.D. 303 and 305, the Emperor Diocletian attempted to completely destroy Christianity. The next emperor, Constantine, believed that he saw a Christian sign in the sky and then he won an important battle, the battle at Milvian Bridge outside of Rome, in the name of Christianity. Thus, he was convinced that Christianity was the “true religion.”
5. So, in A.D. 313, the edict of Milan was issued and Christianity became the official religion of the Roman empire. Over the next century, pagan temples were converted into Christian churches. As that took place, Judaism was more and more marginalized. At the same time, variant forms of Christianity were also marginalized.
6. Whether Constantine’s decision to become a Christian really changed the empire, or whether he may simply have recognized the inevitable triumph of Christianity, the results were the same.
7. Constantine regarded Christianity as the authoritative “glue” that legitimized his rule and gave him the power to reign over the empire.
8. He took it upon himself to “weigh in” on Christian disputes and to ban “heretics.”
9. So, we see that political influence was involved in deciding Christian doctrine. A very important council took place at Nicaea in A.D. 325 to determine whether the church would be basically Trinitarian or Unitarian—whether they would follow Athanasius or Arian. (The real question was: Could the “human” Jesus really be God?)
10. In A.D. 330, Constantine decided to move his capital from Rome to Byzantium, and he renamed it Constantinople. He thus moved the headquarters of the empire from the western portion of the empire to the eastern portion of the empire.

11. As a result, the eastern empire remained steadfastly linked to the Emperor's rule and the patriarch of Constantinople became the religious leader of eastern Christianity for a thousand years.
12. When the emperor left Rome, a power vacuum was created. The Bishop of Rome eventually stepped into that position. Therefore, the western portion of the empire became increasingly Latin in language and culture. The pope became the religious leader of western Europe and was a dominant political force as well as a dominant religious force.
13. How did that impact the story of our Bible? When the writings of Athanasius were accepted as dominant and the writings of Aryan were rejected, it was done with official government approval. When the church met at the Council of Carthage in A.D. 397 and made a number of religious decisions, those decisions enjoyed the backing of official imperial authority.
14. Furthermore, Constantine put the services of the empire's best scribes to work producing 50 copies of the best "Christian Bible" that was available. It included the Greek Septuagint and the Christian New Testament. **That was the first time that a single volume actually included what we might call today the "Bible."**
15. Those new "Bibles" were sometimes produced with heavy wooden covers and locks that could be locked shut. That reinforced the idea that the Jewish Old Testament was fulfilled by the Christian New Testament and the two belonged together as sacred history.
16. As might be expected, this new official religion, Christianity, resulted in new forms of worship. Over a period of time, the pagan, polytheistic traditions were "Christianized" and given Christian names and became official state religious traditions.
17. At the same time, the Jewish Bible lost its official status. But it was read—by those who could read Hebrew—as God's Word for the children of Abraham. It was regarded as God's instruction for them, rather than some kind of official document belonging to a certain nation. Thus, the *Torah*, or *Tanakh*, was read as inspired *instruction*, and as God's commands for His people who had been scattered, rather than as a history that made winners out of some and losers out of others.

© 2007 Kenneth Hart M. D. ***Permission is hereby granted for any noncommercial use of these materials. Free distribution is encouraged. It is our goal to see them spread as widely and freely as possible. If you would like to use them for your class or even make copies of portions of them, feel free to do so. We always enjoy hearing about how you might be using the materials and we might even want to share good ideas with others, so let us know.***

Info@theox.org

Last modified: December 9, 2007

C:\My Documents\WP\StoryofBible\5-Bible to Us-Fin.wpd