

## BOXES Introduction to the Bible 1. The story of the Old Testament

The Bible is the book that we base our Christian Faith on. The Christian Bible falls into two sections. The Old Testament called the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. It is in the new testament that we find the stories of Jesus. There are about 16 facts that are almost universally agreed by scholars who study Jesus and the Boxes of Discovery Bible studies are based around looking at the story through these agreed facts.

One of the them is that Jesus gathered a group of students. We call them his disciples.

The new Testament contains the story of one Jesus but told in four different versions. These four

versions are the gospels written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. In John's gospel he tells us of a man called Nathaniel (John 1:43-51) who is sitting under a fig tree. He knows his Torah and prophets. His friend Philip comes to him and says

'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote. Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth. Come and see!'

When Nathaniel hears Jesus speak, he says 'Rabbi, you are the son of God! You are king of Israel.'

In the story John tells us that just the day before, Jesus met two other men and he asked them a question.

'What are you looking for?' The men then spent the afternoon with Jesus, but before they started

talking one of the two men, Andrew, found his brother Simon Peter and said to him 'We have found the Messiah.'

The questions that hang over this passage include:

1. Why were they looking for the Messiah?
2. How were they going to recognise the Messiah?
3. What were their expectations of the Messiah for their lives?

Mark, Matthew and Luke do tell the story differently from John and it is only later in the story that the disciples recognise Jesus as the Messiah, but the same question about expectations hangs over the reply.

So what are the expectations?

Jesus and his initial followers including his disciples were all Jews and so knew their Hebrew scriptures well. We still read the Hebrews scriptures they are contained in what we call the Old Testament of our bible.

So that is where we have to start when looking for an answer about the messianic expectations.

The Old Testament is the story of one group of people from what Historians refer to as the Ancient Near East (MAP?). From the archaeological excavations of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century we know the areas contained a number of great civilisations including nations such as Ancient Egypt, Assyria and Babylon. We know that there were many peoples involved in the ancient near Eastern history including

Sumerians, Akkadians, Babylonians, Hittites, Phoenicians, Hurrians and Canaanites. These people produced large civilisations, but there is only one people who emerged after the death of their state and produced a community and a culture that can be traced through various twists and turns, changes and difficulties right down to the modern period.

And this group was the Judeans. They carried with them a radical new idea, a sacred scripture, a life changing event and a set of traditions that would lay the foundations for the major religions of the western world: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. As a Jew, Nathaniel would have been aware of this radical idea, those sacred scriptures, the life

changing event and the traditions that day sitting under his fig tree.

That story is the story told in the Old Testament that sets up the expectations of Andrew, Peter, Phillip, Nathaniel and in fact all who went on to follow Jesus including us today.

So what is this story? What is the radical new idea and what were the expectations of a Messiah at the times Jesus called his first disciples?

1. The radical new idea was that there was only one God, Yahweh rather than a group of gods headed by a superior god. Unlike the other gods spoken about by other groups, Yahweh does not come from a pre-existing realm. He is free of all the limitations of magic.

He is the source of all being himself. He is a good, just and compassionate god and human morality is about conforming with this. God places moral demands on humanity.

2. The scriptures are the Hebrew Bible what Christians call, with some differences, the Old Testament.
3. The traditions are those developed through history by the Israelite people.

The Hebrew bible consists of 39 books. It is a library rather than one book. Or more helpfully it is an anthology written over a very long time by people living in very different situations responding to different issues with varying viewpoints. In some ways it's like a modern day debate about issues concerning God and his people.

The Jewish Hebrew Bible scholar, Christine Hayes, points out that

‘Biblical narratives are not pious stories, they are very diverse stories about realistic people in realistic situations whose actions are not always the best and whose lives should not always be used as models for our own’

She goes on to say:

‘The Old Testament is not a book full of saints, it is full of humans not superhumans and their behaviours can be scandalous, violent, rebellious, outrageous, lewd and vicious.’ This can often seem shocking when you first read the Old Testament. But at the same time, like real people, they can change and can act in ways