

A BOOKISH FAITH BY DEWAYNE BRYANT

Christianity demonstrates many distinctive features when compared with other world religions. One of those features is its “bookish” nature (a term frequently used by New Testament scholar Larry Hurtado). Early Christians valued texts more highly—and used them much more often—than any other religion at the time except Judaism. It is perhaps because of Christianity that we tend to identify religions according to their sacred texts, which was virtually unheard of in antiquity.

Roman religions focused on activities or performances, usually consisting of making offerings or sacrifices to the gods. People liked receiving divine favors, and they thought of their gods as enjoying gifts provided by their worshippers. If people wanted to express thanks for something the deity had done, they might leave a gift (such as a votive object) in the temple to show their thanks. Religions also featured temples, altars, shrines, sacred places, and images of the gods. Texts made little if any contribution to the worship of the Roman gods.

Early Christians emphasized texts. This has caused some scholars to question whether Christianity could even be called a “religion” by Roman standards. While they practiced religious activities such as baptism and the Lord’s Supper, they did not have other items traditionally used by other religious groups. Biblical Christianity has no altars, temples, shrines, and the like. Unlike their pagan counterparts, Christians regularly read texts as part of worship. The only other group to do so were Jews in the synagogue (cf. Luke 4:16-21; Acts 13:14-15; 15:21).

The production of texts can only be described as impressive. Other religions had myths concerning their gods, but virtually nothing we would call “scripture.” Mithraism, for example, is a Roman mystery cult which appears in the historical record shortly after the founding of the church. It has almost no textual or inscriptional evidence, leaving scholars to wonder about a great many things the early worshippers of Mithras believed and taught. In contrast, Christians wrote voluminously. In the first three centuries of the church, believers had authored over 200 different compositions. Only a select portion produced by the inspired writers would be counted as Scripture, but it does highlight the textual nature of early Christianity.

The production and dissemination of texts further show the interconnectedness of Christians. While different versions of gods might be worshipped in various locations, the early Christians seem focused on the importance of consistent belief (2 Tim. 1:13-14; 2:24-26; Tit. 1:9-11; 2:1). The apostle Paul required faithful Christians to transmit sound doctrine accurately (2 Tim. 2:2). Not only did it properly equip the faithful (2 Tim. 3:15-17), it communicated the means of salvation (Eph. 1:13; 1 Tim. 4:16). Further, the biblical authors instructed their fellow Christians to earnestly

contend for the faith (Jude 3), because any tampering with the truth would lead to dire consequences (Rev. 22:18-19; see also Deut. 4:2; Prov. 30:6).

The books of the New Testament were given to many different churches for reading. Paul tells the church in Colossae to share his writings with the church in Laodicea and vice versa (Col. 4:16). He sends his epistle to the Galatians not to one congregation but the “**churches of Galatia**” (Gal. 1:2). Paul may have intended his letter to the Romans to include more than one congregation (Rom. 1:7). Most famously, the book of Revelation was meant to be read by the seven churches of Asia (Rev. 1:4). This emphasis upon sharing texts seems to have been intended not only to foster a sense of community but to ensure that Christians had a consistent doctrine.

A particularly interesting feature of the New Testament books is their sheer size. Letters in the ancient world could be quite short. The longest letter composed by the Roman orator Cicero’s is 2,350 words, while the Roman philosopher Seneca’s longest is 4,134 words. Both of Paul’s letters to the Corinthians exceed these lengths, with his letter to the Romans consisting of an impressive 7,101 words. Even the relatively short letter to Philemon was quite long by Roman standards. This probably explains Paul’s comment about others considering his letters to be “**weighty**” (2 Cor. 10:10)—it was probably a comment more on their size than their contents. While philosophers did use letters to communicate their teachings, no other individual or group did so like Paul and the other New Testament authors.

Finally, passages in the New Testament make it clear that the books carried authority. Paul intended his letters to serve as authorities when he could not be present himself (1 Cor. 14:37-38). The apostle Peter included a reference to the authority of Paul’s letters, placing them in the same category as “**the other Scriptures**” (2 Pet. 3:15-16). When using this term, New Testament authors generally refer to the books of the Hebrew Bible. In other words, within his lifetime Paul’s writings had been accorded the same status as the books that God-fearers had considered inspired for many centuries.

Unlike other world religions of the time — and even some today — Christianity has always been a faith concerned with Scripture. The value that Christians ascribed their texts is indicated by the massive number available in light of the time, effort, and expense involved in copying these documents. In spite of the substantial cost, believers reproduced these texts because of their central importance to the faith. This should impress upon modern believers a sense of awe at the very fact that Bibles are so readily available to Christians in the West. It should also concern us whenever someone emphasizes opinions or feelings over the Word of God. Christians considered their Scriptures indispensably precious for life and faith. So should we.