

You CAN Handle the Truth
or
Will the Real Bible Please Stand up?

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One time during Lent in my previous Pastoral Charge, we had a fund raiser which was designed to help us appreciate the many blessings we take for granted. It consisted of a calender in which each day was marked with something that you had to count the number of a thing in your house, like “pay 10 cents for each television you own.” On one of these squares was something like “pay 25 cents for each bible you own.” Carl saw this and groaned. He told me that this square would break the bank for the Yates family. It is true that most ministers can not bear to throw away a bible. So we become the collectors, the point of last refuge for bibles others have decided are no longer important to them. So here I am today with a large laundry basket full of different versions of the bible. So, here is a skill testing question for you. Which of these bibles is the correct one? Which is the one that is closest to God’s own words? The truth is they all have value and would have spoken clearly to some audience at a certain time and place.

God did not write the bible with a Bic pen. God used people and communities to bring us God’s word. There were no writers who became mindless robot-writers-for-God either. You will never find in the bible a person so “possessed” by God that they do not have their own will and personality. God utilizes people with all their attributes of perspective and personality. The bible did not come to us by divine dictation but rather divine inspiration, with all the inherent distractions and challenges brought about by such a manner of transmission.

Clergy and church leaders bear most of the responsibility for our current state of cultural biblical illiteracy. Many ministers have told me that they don’t talk about how our bible really came to us because they are afraid of “ruining people’s faith.” Consequently, rational thinking people reject what they know to be inadequate explanations about what the bible is and how it came to be. Such thinkers tend to reject then the bible as useful. The church has not been very good at assisting these parishioners in exploring the bible in an intelligent, challenging way that makes room for questions and insight. I have confidence in you. I believe you are strong enough, adult enough, spiritually mature enough and smart enough to handle the truth about how these pages of scripture came to us. It is also true that some clergy like to capitalize on the “magic” theory. If people believe that scripture comes to us by some kind of divine postal service or other magic, then as minister/priest/pastor you get to be the magic expert. There is much power in that role. I am enough of a daughter of the reformation to believe, like Luther, in the priesthood of all believers. That means *you* have a responsibility to understand the truth about the bible.

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The Story of the Bible: How the World’s Bestselling Book Came to Be (Wood Lake Books, Vancouver, 1998), states:

The Bible may look like one book, but it really comprises a collection of books. The word “Bible

comes from the Greek word “biblia” which means “little scrolls” referring to the separate rolls of leather parchment on which the sacred writings of antiquity were recorded. The individual writings that make up our Bible were compiled and edited over a period of more than 1,000 years. The 66 books of the Bible are divided into two main sections, the Old Testament and the New Testament (also referred to as the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures or Testaments). The books of the Hebrew Testament tell of God’s relationship with the Hebrew people, or Israelites. The writings take many forms: stories, historical summaries, legal codes, lists (e.g. genealogies), hymns, poetry, prophetic writing, wisdom sayings (e.g. proverbs), and apocalyptic writing. Some of the books are quite short, some quite long; they are not printed in the order in which they were first written. There are 39 books in the Hebrew Testament. The Jewish tradition groups the contents differently and has 24 books.

The Greek Testament contains 27 books, many of which were originally letters, and four narratives about Jesus which we refer to as the Gospels. The Book of Acts tells us that it was compiled by the same person as was the Gospel of Luke. It recounts the actions of the apostles, after Jesus’ resurrection, and those of later followers of Jesus who formed early Christian communities.

First things first: the Old Testament (Hebrew Scriptures)

The Old Testament, (Hebrew Scriptures), was originally written in the Hebrew language. After the Israelites occupied the promised land for many generations, a series of corrupt governments made the nation vulnerable to invasion. Sure enough, the country was eventually invaded and anyone able-bodied was carried off to captivity in Babylon. The nation of Israel was devastated; only the old, very young, infirm and weak were left behind. Residing over several generations in Babylon, the captives lived, worked and intermarried with the Babylonians. Religious leaders of this exiled community began to grapple with serious questions such as “How did this happen to us? Does God no longer love us? Who are we as a people and how can we preserve our traditions and religion while we are surrounded by this foreign culture and religion?” It became critically important to write down the fundamental understandings of the story of God’s relationship with the Israelites. During this period the faith story of the Hebrew people began to be preserved from an oral to a written form. When a kindly King finally let the Israelites return to Israel they arrived, scriptures in hand. These were added to as the faith story continued.

The Scribes were the group of professionals that became responsible for writing, keeping and disseminating the scriptures that had become so important to the Jewish religion. The scribes were called *sopherim*, which means “the counters” because of the method they used to proofread their work. We take printing presses for granted.

We do not realize the labour that was involved in producing written material. Everything was done by individuals and by painstaking hand labour. After the scribes finished copying a book they would count all the letters and words and tally their count with the original document they were copying. Before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947 and 1956, the earliest copy of the Hebrew Scriptures dated from the *ninth century*. A full copy of

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Isaiah was found in the Dead Sea Scrolls which is estimated to have been written in the *first century*. The scribes did their work so well that 95 percent of the two texts of Isaiah were identical despite

being written 1000 years apart!

A “canon” means a group of writings considered to be authoritative and legitimate. The last book to be included in the Hebrew canon was Daniel. Daniel was written about 200 years before Jesus was born, coming into being during a time of Greek occupation and severe persecution of the state of Israel. Apocalyptic literature arises out of communities under extreme persecution and Daniel is no exception. As a book it refers frequently to the historic Babylonian persecution. After Daniel, because Israel was subsequently occupied and persecuted by the Romans, many Apocalyptic books appeared within the Jewish community. In 66 CE (AD), after a Jewish rebellion, Rome sent the army in to destroy the great Jewish temple, centre of worship and religion for Jews everywhere. Exacting in their work, not even small stones remained at the site of the great Temple. This event was devastating for both Christian and Jewish communities. As religious leaders struggled to cope with this cataclysmic event, a council of Jewish rabbis closed what is known as the Hebrew “canon”. Thus, what we now know as Hebrew Scriptures was set.

The Jesus Movement:

It is important to remember that the Old Testament was the only bible Jesus knew. There was no New Testament. That came much later, after Jesus’ death. The Hebrew scriptures, in Jesus’ day, were written in Greek, the language of commerce and learning. As time went on, fewer scholars spoke or wrote Hebrew. Jesus, like everyone else, spoke Aramaic.

After the temple was destroyed and Jerusalem burned, Christians began to ask for an account of the life of Jesus. It had not seemed important before that because, truthfully, the waiting Christian community thought that the second coming of Christ would happen next week - then next month - then next year. Finally, the community began to acknowledge that they had to find some way of unifying the tradition and organize themselves so as to live in a world in which Christ might come next week or in 3000 years. As more people began coming into the Christian community from differing cultures and belief systems, heresies and bizarre traditions began to develop. There was no end to the number of “gospels” that appeared. Some we still have remnants of. There are the “Gospel of Mary,” the “Gospel of Thomas,” the “Gospel of the Nazoreans” to mention just a few. The church needed an official book containing what was considered orthodox “truth” - a canon of New Testament. So, we have all these gospels, books and letters floating around. What do you think the church people did? They did what all good church people do; they fought about them! Finally in 367 CE Bishop Athanasius proposed the list of books now accepted as Holy Scripture. So, the Christian canon was fixed, to be altered slightly during the Reformation.

As the centuries wore on, everyone spoke Latin all over Europe. In order for the common person to be able to read the bible in their own language, Jerome translated the bible into Latin, the new language of commerce and learning. This translation was called the Vulgate and was written about 400 CE. We have all played the “telephone game” where someone whispers to someone else who whispers their interpretation of what they have heard to another. With every telling, some accuracy is lost. It is important to remember that the books of the Greek testament

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underwent the same process of compiling and editing that the Hebrew scriptures did. Most of Paul's letters are believed to be fragments. So we have Jesus' words, spoken in Aramaic, translated into Greek which was then translated into Latin.

In general, writing was not an easy process. How did they print bibles? Most scripture was printed on parchment folded and sewn together, called "Codices." A codex is a grouping of codices. Practically, in the Christian era, rooms full of monks were specifically tasked to do this. One guy had a copy and would read it out loud and the other guys in the room would write it out. It was not without significant problems. Sometimes monks added their own small commentaries which would be thereafter included as "gospel." These little additions are called "glosses" by bible scholars. These little mistakes prove quite useful for those people seeking to date manuscripts and fragments. I call it the "Apple pie recipe theory of dating hand written stuff." For example if I wrote a recipe for Nova Scotian apple pie and four of you copied it and took it home with you. One of you from Ontario might copy down 2 teaspoons of cinnamon instead of my 1 teaspoon. Thereafter when that recipe was copied by folks from Ontario it would have that mistake in it. Someone from British Columbia might have copied down 3 cups of flour instead of 4. So, all the British Columbian people would be copying down the incorrect amount of flour. We know which is the oldest version by tracing back the emergence of variance.

Overall, hand copying scripture was a terribly expensive way to create written copies of anything. No one could own a bible priced so prohibitively. The fabulously wealthy might have had a copy of a gospel or psalms, but owning an entire copy was almost impossible for even the wealthiest of citizens. Some very rich dioceses or cathedrals might own a full copy of the Latin Vulgate. It was certain to be chained down or guarded very carefully. During the dark and middle ages, the vast majority of the populace was illiterate anyway. They were expected to learn their gospels stories filtered through the voices of the clergy. Stained glass windows augmented this by pictorially relating the stories.

The Church and the Ruling classes decided the Bible was too "good" for the common folk:

Many, many people died so that we could read and hear the bible in our own language. I strongly believe that all of us who consider ourselves "Christians" need to read the bible for this reason alone. The bible contains God's word which is the property of God's people, particularly within the context of public worship so people other than the minister need to read it aloud. To governments, the most dangerous of machines was the printing press. After its invention in 1451, suddenly ideas could be disseminated on paper cheaply. The powerful knew it could truly revolutionize the world as they knew it. Before the Reformation the established church of Rome was the most powerful and wealthiest entity in Europe. It was always in conflict with the aristocracy who wanted the church's land, money and power for themselves. Many rulers converted to the protestant faith, giving them the right to confiscate church property. Sometimes people say "If we only did away with religion we would have no more wars." There have always been men who seek to amass wealth and power by using the ideals of those who are willing to die for such ideals. The very nature of being human invites us to struggle to understand the world within an ethical, meaning- making framework. As long as human beings support ideas such as democracy, equality, freedom, religion, etc....there will always be those who are willing to fight for such ideals. There will therefore always be men who use that impulse for

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their own selfish ambitions. Do we get rid of all good ideas and ideals? Getting rid of religion or other high ideals won't stop such men and might even help them succeed.

In terms of the Reformation as much as the two sides hated each other and duked it out viciously all through the Reformation, they could both agree on one thing - the common person should never be allowed to read the bible. The powerful considered the bible to contain radical, even dangerous ideas. Next weeks reading containing the Magnificat, or the song of Mary, talks about a radical redressing of wrongs, a new equality desired by God above all things, (Luke 1:46-55). It describes a world where the high will be brought low and the low high. The powerful feared that if allowed to read the gospels, the people might learn of Jesus' concern for the poor and his belief in the dignity of all human beings. The average, downtrodden worker might learn of God's love for them and the expectation that the mighty use their power for the empowerment and lifting up of all. In recent history, many a South American dictator forbid the reading of the Magnificat from pulpits, believing it to incite the ordinary person to rebellion against tyranny. This is the same reason Southern masters wouldn't let their slaves read the bible. They might learn about the book of Exodus which outlined God's plan to free the Israelites from slavery. This was a prophetic impulse because this scripture passage did indeed become the central theological idea of the freedom movement within black communities. No, all sides of the conflict during the Reformation felt very strongly that the ordinary commoner should not find out about the freedom, equality, dignity promised by God throughout the Bible! People might start to get uppity. In 1408, the English parliament passed an act that decreed no one could translate the bible into common English. To enforce it, books of the bible were burnt and sometimes the people who possessed them were also burned alive for good measure!!

In 1451 the printing press was invented. This changed everything. William Tyndale believed that all people should be able to have access to a bible in their own language. He found no supporters for his project in England and was, in fact, threatened with personal harm were he to continue. In 1525 he made arrangements to print the bible in Cologne, Germany. However when church authorities there found out what he was up to, he was forced to flee to Worms, where 3,000 copies of the book were published in late 1525. Based on Erasmus' Greek text, Tyndale's bible used the English of the day. To us, the English seems stilted and Shakespearian-like. To his contemporaries it would have been the equivalent of our "Good News" bible - simple and to the point in the everyday street language of the English people. Copies were smuggled into England and the world was never the same since. For his efforts, Tyndale was hunted down, arrested, hung and, to ensure he could not be resurrected during the second coming, burnt. However, the flood of bibles into England continued. As they were confiscated and burnt, more would come in, so hungry were people for the word of God. Many, many people sacrificed their personal safety and the safety of their families to ensure that others could read God's word. When King James came to the throne of England after the death of Queen Elizabeth I, serious religious controversies gripped England. After many years of political and religious turmoil, King James agreed to publish a version "authorized" by the state, his state. Thus, the King James Version of the bible was born.

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The King James Version is not magic

Despite what you may have heard, there is nothing magical about the King James version of the bible. It was written in common everyday English but there was considerable opposition to it by common folk. Many felt that only the old Latin version of the bible was divine or “magic” enough to be called the bible. Eventually, it became the only version that many people considered valid. It is ironic that at its own inception, the Latin vulgate was rejected by common folk at the beginning because it was considered to “vulgar” or common to be the divine word. The Latin version eventually becomes the divine language and people become outraged that people would translate the bible into the “common” language of Elizabethan English! Similarly we have folks who think that the only divine language is the Shakespearian type of language used in the King James version. The problem with this is the ramifications of the telephone game. I don’t know about you, but I was never very good at translating Shakespeare’s plays into some semblance of language in my head that I can understand clearly. The same thing happens when we read the King James bible. Consequently we miss a lot of meaning. The scholars of the day used their best translations from the Latin vulgate, some Greek texts and some Hebrew texts to create their olde English texts. Then we, in turn have to mentally translate that olde English into our own modern English. So, to refresh the series of translations in terms of the New Testament in the King James version, we go from Jesus’ original language of Aramaic →Greek→Latin→Shakespearean English→modern English (as we try to read it.). Some accuracy is inevitably lost at each point. Wouldn’t you like to get as close to the intent of Jesus’ teachings as possible? It is true that, like Shakespearean plays, some passages of the bible retain a certain beauty when related in olde English - the 23rd psalm comes to mind. It is very appropriate to use the King James version when reciting some of these beloved passages.

I don’t know about you but I would never use medieval forms of medicine to cure my aches and pains. I would not trust the vast majority of scientific theory from 400 years ago. Why then should we decide that the biblical scholarship of that day is the be all, end all? In the years subsequent to the writing of the King James version, many fragments of ancient manuscripts have been found. Archeology has taught us much about ancient language and culture. The discovery of the 2000 year old Dead Sea Scrolls revolutionized our understanding of Jesus’ time, place and culture. Culture use of metaphors and language makes a difference. For example, say that I became known as a Holy Woman and I write to Glenn Fox a letter that says “Dear Glenn, it is raining cats and dogs today.” One thousand years from now, if people did not know the nuances of our language and culture they may decide that I had created a miracle of cats and dogs dropping out of the sky! The more we learn about ancient Jewish culture, the more we can truly understand what Jesus was telling us and what the early church tried to preserve about his life. All of this knowledge is collected, argued about and then distilled periodically into a new version of the bible that more fully attempts to be true to the original words of those who wrote the various books. The New Revised Standard

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Version, (NRSV), which you have in front of you today attempts to bring the latest, best scholarship to the task of translation keeping as close as possible to the original language and intent of ancient writers of the bible.

Here is the good news for you. Many, many people died so that we could have the privilege of reading the Bible. I encourage you to make bible reading part of your own spiritual discipline. Also, now that we have NRSV pew bibles I will now accept “reading the pew bible” as an acceptable reason to not pay attention to the sermon!

