

BIBLE 101: WHAT IS THE BIBLE AND HOW DID IT COME TO BE?

Psalm 119: 97-114 I Peter 1:24-25

The Knox Book Group is reading this month *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hossein. It is number one this week on the New York Time's bestseller list of hardcover fiction books. The number one bestseller on the non-fiction hardcover list is *The Reagan Diaries* by Ronald Reagan. A book that is not included on the list even though it is a rare week when it is not a bestseller is the Bible. Without a doubt the Bible is the world's all-time bestselling book with an estimated 2 billion copies in print. It is not only the bestselling book ever, it is also the most translated book in the world, now approaching 2500 languages, more than any other text in history.

Even though a bestseller, the Bible is "much more easily revered than read."¹ As much as we want to have a Bible in our home, near at hand; as much as we want to know more about the Bible, it is an "elusive, unknown, slightly daunting book."² So much so, that polls in recent years conducted by a variety of research groups indicate that even though the Bible continues to be a bestseller, biblical literacy has gone down rather than up. Peter Gomes in his book *The Good Book* writes, "It used to be said that most Christian adults live their lives (based on) a 2nd grade Sunday School education, and that the more they hear of the Bible in church, the less they feel they know about it."³

The addition of new Bibles for use in worship sparked in me a desire to build upon your education with a sermon series that I have titled "Bible 101". As the title indicates it is an introduction to the Bible rather than an all-encompassing exploration. For some of you this will be pretty elementary, for others it will be new. Wherever you are on the Biblical literacy scale, my hope is that this series will wet your appetite for God's Word and a desire to make reading, praying and studying the Bible a part of your faith walk.

Today we begin with the question: "What is the Bible?" It is a question that could be answered in a variety of ways. First, the word Bible is from the Greek word *biblios* which means books. So what is the Bible? It is not a book but a library of books, sixty-six separate books collected from the writings of ancient Hebrews and early Christians. For those of you who have one of our new Bibles near at hand, or children your new Bible, let's open it up to the very front and find the Table of Contents.

You'll see the listing of all the books: 39 books in the Old Testament and 27 books in the New Testament. The word "testament" means "covenant" or "agreement". The Old Testament tells the story of God's covenant with the Hebrew people and is regarded as sacred by both Jews and Christians. The New Testament is the story of God's covenant with all humanity in and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Old Testament is the covenant of law and the New Testament is the covenant of grace.

Another way to answer the question, "What is the Bible?" is to talk about the uniqueness of its composition. The Bible was written over a period of at least 1500 years by more than 40 authors who come from different social and occupational backgrounds; for example, Moses a political leader, educated in Pharaoh's court – Solomon, a king – Amos, a shepherd - Peter a fisherman – Luke, a physician – Matthew, a tax-collector. The authors of the Bible wrote in completely different geographic environments and under different circumstances using different literary styles; for example, Moses in the desert writing history – David in the mountains and in his palace writing songs and poetry – Paul in prison writing letters. They wrote in different states of mind – some in a state of great joy, others in a state of mourning and despair. Although unique in its composition - 40 different authors, three different languages (Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek), over the course of 1500 years on three different continents (Asia, Africa and Europe), and in a variety of literary styles, - the Bible has a central subject, God and a unifying theme, the story of God's faithful, loving relationship with and toward humanity. (Next Sunday's focus.)

The Bible is unique in another way - its very survival. This addresses the question of how the Bible came to be. The printing press wasn't invented until the 1450s which means the Bible survived first as stories being told from one generation to the next and then once the stories were written down on perishable material surviving centuries of being copied by hand over and over again. It makes one wonder if the Bible we read today is the same collection of books that were originally written in ancient times. Amazingly, they are. For example, for centuries the oldest available text we had of the Old Testament was a manuscript called the Leningrad Codex, written around the year 1008 on vellum, a material prepared from calf or antelope skin. Then with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947, texts of the Old Testament were found dating back hundreds of years before Christ. This includes a complete manuscript of Isaiah, dated about 100 B.C.E. – 1000 years older than any previously known copy. When comparing these manuscripts separated by a 1000 plus years, scholars were amazed that the texts were nearly identical.

As far as the New Testament we have, for example, fragments of John's gospel that date from 110-130 AD, within 30 years of his death. Most of the Gospel of John is also contained in the Bodmer Papyrus II and dates from around 150-200 AD. Then the oldest complete New Testament discovered so far, dates from 325-350 AD. Remarkably, the Bible we read today, other than being translated into English, is nearly identical to these ancient manuscripts. As such the Bible stands today as the best-preserved literary work of all antiquity, and its overall reliability is without question.

But how did we settle on 66 books? Over the course of about a thousand years Old Testament writers compiled a series of stories. By about 200 B.C.E. most of the Old Testament material had been gathered together and was generally accepted by the Jewish community as sacred. This collection of Law, Prophets, and Writings came to 39 books in all and at a council of Jewish rabbis, meeting at Jamnia, Palestine, in the year 95 as noted by Josephus, the first century historian, these rabbis decided that no more books should be admitted to the group of sacred writings. The New Testament was written over a period of about 40 years with the Letter of James now recognized as the earliest writing, about the year 45. The early church gradually began gathering together a collection of Christian writings that considered most important. By the year 200 there was general agreement about the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, and Paul's letters. Other writings were "on the border" for some time, but by the year 397 at a meeting of Church leaders known as the Council of Carthage the 27 books were approved and designated as the church "canon" from a Greek word meaning "norm" or "standard" for the Christian faith.

If the canon of 66 books we call the Bible is indeed the norm or standard for our faith journey, the question is not just "What is the Bible?" Just as important in this Bible 101 series is the question "What is the Bible to you? What can you affirm about the Bible?" One of the things I can affirm about the Bible is that it is the Word of God, that it reveals God to me, that it is a trustworthy guide for my life and my faith, that it speaks to the kind of relationship God wants to have with me and how I am to live my life in light of that relationship. In the words of the psalmist the Bible, God's Word "*is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.*" It is a reminder to me that life is a journey and that God is with me on this journey and that God's Word is light for the journey. Now when the psalmist speaks of a *lamp* he is referring to what looked like a flattened clay teapot with a little oil and one small wick that provided just enough light to see the next step in the journey. So as God's Word the Bible assures me that God is with me, never more than one step ahead, giving light.

Now if God's Word as revealed in Holy Scripture in what we call the Bible is to be my light, the psalmist reminds me that I must "meditate" on it all day long, that I must keep scripture "always with me". I must admit that I am falling in short in that regard, but I have done it often enough through the years to know that when I read the Bible, study the Bible, pray the Bible I am giving myself a wonderful means for encountering God, for discovering the deep things of God, and for daring to let God speak to my heart, my life.

Friends, the Bible is more than a collection of sixty-six books with a long and unique history, it is "one of the most available and extraordinary means by which (we as) humans are brought into proximity with the divine."⁴ If we truly want to draw nearer to God, one thing we must do is read the Bible, study the Bible, pray the Bible.

So this week let's dust off our Bibles. Recall a favorite Bible story and find that story again in your Bible. Read it, meditate on it, contemplate its meaning for your life now. Let it be the lamp for your feet and the light for your path.

NOTES:

1. Gomes, Peter J. *The Good Book*, William and Moore and Company, Inc., 1996, p. 7.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 4
3. *Ibid.*, p. 6
4. *Ibid.*, p.351