

“The Bible – What Do We Really Know?”

Reflections on the Bible’s Creation

7th of February 2010

Seriously, what do we really know about the bible? Oh, I am sure there are a few bible nerds out there that can name all the books in order, or tell us how many are in the Old Testament and how many are in the New Testament, but if you are really knowledgeable, can you tell me which book will you find Moses building the ark? Genesis, you say? Obviously Exodus, you retort? Moses didn’t build the ark silly, Noah did!

And for the record, the bible was not written in the “King James English,” and if I hear another Christian spout, “Well if the ‘King James English’ was good enough for Jesus it is good enough for me,” I am going to smite my cat. I did honor detail last week at a Navy funeral where the preacher droned on and on about how the “King James Bible” was the word of God and all other translations are blasphemy; could hardly keep standing at attention for want to scream, “You are an idiot!” While we are on the subject of all things “King James,” for those of you who place so much stock in him I have a piece of trivia for you: he was gay. So for all you fundamentalist King James Bible thumpers chew on the gravity of that for a while.

One might wonder why the King James Bible is such a pet peeve of mine. Well, besides the erroneous belief it is the only “proper translation,” I personally do not like reading anything written in English that I cannot read – “thee’s,” thou’s,” and “begats” – who speaks like this anymore? I have flashbacks to literature class and being forced to read Shakespeare! Sure, I love Shakespeare’s plays – as long as I am watching them! “King James Version” is Shakespearean English, so don’t tell me you can read it and understand any of it; and there is nothing worse than being quoted scripture from the “King James Bible” knowing the person doing the quoting has no clue what they are saying.

I am a little suspect of old Bill Shakespeare too. There is a historical rumor that he had a hand in the translation efforts for the King James Bible, and I can prove it. If old Bill had a hand in this great literary creation then he probably would have been 46 years of age at the time. Interestingly enough, if we turn to “Psalm 46” of the “King James Bible” we find the following:

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; Though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof. Selah. There is a river the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacles of the most High. God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved: God shall help her, and that right early. The heathen raged, the kingdoms were moved: he uttered his voice, the earth melted. The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah. Come, behold the works of the LORD, what desolations he hath made in the earth. He maketh wars to cease unto the end of the earth; he breaketh the bow, and cutteth the spear in sunder; he burneth the chariot in the fire. Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth. The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Now, taking that Psalm from the top count down 46 words, then taking the Psalm from the bottom count up 46 words and viola:

*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; Though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains **shake** with the swelling thereof. Selah. There is a river the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacles of the most High. God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved: God shall help her, and that right early. The heathen raged, the kingdoms were moved: he uttered his voice, the earth melted. The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah. Come, behold the works of the LORD, what*

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If a man took that much liberty with the original tongues of scriptures morphing it in such a way that he leaves his signature in the same numbered Psalm as his age, then my gosh, what else did the rascal from Stratford-upon-Avon do to the “King James Bible.” Oh yes, I did run this by one of the world’s foremost experts on King James Bibles during my time at SMU, and yes, she looked at me as though I had been abducted and probed by alien beings – and you may be wondering the same thing too -- but I saw this on TV once, so don’t you dare tell me that little electronic god is lying.

Let me dazzle you with some more interesting bits. In the year 1227 – back in the days when men were men and women were women – Professor Stephen Langton thumbs through his bible and realizes, “Gosh, it sure is hard to find scriptures to quote,” (I totally fabricated his inner thought bubble) and he adds – for the first time EVER – chapters to the books of the bible, in that steady march of progress, three hundred years later, a printer by the name of Robert Stephanus adds “numbered sentences” – verses – and he does so quite randomly. Over a thousand years after the bible is put to paper and finally collected together these two guys add chapters and verses to our Bible, and this concept serves no other purpose than to make it easier to find places in the Bible. Think about that next time you, someone you love, or some crazed preacher is tossing scripture quotations around loosely -- chapters and verses have enabled us to lift things out of context and utterly lose their meaning!

While I am ranting here consider this, when you say “Bible,” do you mean the Protestant Version? The Roman Catholic Version? The Greek Orthodox Version? The Coptic Bible? The Syriac Bible? I am not talking “translations” here; I am talking about versions of the bible that each contains a different set of books. Ever heard of “Maccabees,” “Judith,” “Tobit,” or the “Odes?” Each of these Christian traditions hold to a different bible that has slight differences with the one we are familiar with.

Martin Luther gave us our current version by the way. When he nailed his complaints to the church door and started the whole “Reformation” thingy he took the Bible of the day and did some editing; removing a few books he did not think worthy to be in the “canon” of scripture. What many do not know today is his attempt to remove two books we hold very dearly. One of those books is the letter of James; Luther was a stickler for the idea of “Grace,” there is no way we can ever accumulate enough good works to earn our salvation, hence the necessity of “Grace.” “James” is a letter that is choke full of emphasis on Christians getting off their pews and doing good works, “You say you have faith, show me some works!” This didn’t fit comfortably with Luther’s idea of “Grace” and poor “James” almost ended up on the cutting floor.

Bet you’ll never guess what the other book Luther wanted to ax. If he had succeeded hundreds, if not thousands, of slick-haired televangelists would have no ‘schtick’ from whence to threaten and scare people into thinking the end of the

world is near. Think of poor Tim LaHaye on the unemployment line because Luther successfully deleted the Book of Revelation!

Of course these little tidbits makes one wonder how did our Bible get put together! If you watch documentaries on National Geographic Channel or History Channel, or read Dan Brown's entertaining stories, you might walk away with the impression that some small, cabal, of evil white men held a secret meeting and voted on what books would be allowed in the Bible, and that this vote came down to one vote!

The other night they had some scholars talking on the boob tube about the "banned books of the bible," and how there are nearly 80 gospels that were censured and hidden. They give the impression that such goodies as "the Gospel of Judas" are somehow being kept from us from by a secretive cabal of evil white men who are hiding the truth.

There is some truth to this. There are many books such as the "Gospel of Thomas," the "Gospel of Mary Magdalene," or the "Gospel of Pontus Pilate" that didn't make it into the bible but it wasn't the result of a vote. Within a few generations of Jesus' life the books of the New Testament was pretty much agreed upon. Churches throughout the world held in common a list of books that should be in the bible. They collectively believed the books to have been written by an apostle or close follower, they accepted it as having authority, they believed the books to be consistent with already established beliefs, and these books held high moral and spiritual value.

These "other" books that didn't make it into the bible were written hundreds of years after the church universal already had agreed upon the bible's contents, and the books that did make it were written within fifty years of Jesus' life.

So, what are we missing out on? Such entertaining stories like Adam's first wife, Lilith. Things didn't work out between these two lovebirds and they divorced, and like all ex-spouses Lilith went on to become the incarnation of pure evil. There are stories of Jesus' childhood, especially the terrible twos. One day Jesus is playing in the mud making mud-doves and bringing them to life. A playmate decides that is a bit boastful and he steps on the mud-doves. Jesus pitches a tantrum and says to the boy, "I strike you dead!" And since Jesus is the Son of God the boy actually does fall down dead, which really upsets the boy's parents who demand of Joseph and Mary they do something about their precocious child, "Jesus, you bring him back to life this instant or you are going to time-out!"

Great stories but they hardly rise to the high standards the church universal set for biblical inclusion; not including the fact they are written hundreds of years after Jesus. These stories were not banned, burned, or censured; they just were not considered worthy of attention or preservation.

Maybe this might help our understanding. Being a die-hard Star Wars fan I, along with billions of others, have come to accept that the six Star Wars movies are the official canon of what the Star Wars story is. There are a few purists who would love to delete "Jar-Jar Binks" and the whole Phantom Menace fiasco from the canon but it still contains some stuff of worth. However, the "Ewoks Grand Adventure" filmed in the 80's and this "Clone Wars" cartoon series just isn't worthy to be included in the Star Wars Canon. Hope that helps.

What about these other books that were hidden away by the evil cabal of white men? We have known about them for over a hundred years. They were discovered by shepherd boys – the Nag Hammadi library and the Dead Sea Scrolls – stored away in clay pottery that preserved them. Scholarship loves anything that challenges traditional understanding, and lends automatic credibility to challenges that might overturn thousands of years of church history – that’s the world we live in today, and in the future some scholar will wonder why we were so obsessed with anti-establishment thinking. One other thing, the whole “secret-cabal-of-white-men” thing, the early church was quite diverse so before you go running off believing what you see on TV or at the movies learn the truth about your faith and your scriptures.