

SERMON – 01/20/08

Tough Question #2

“Tell me about the Bible”

This month’s sermon series, “Tacking the Tough Questions,” got its origin from over 100 sets of questions submitted this past Christmas Eve by worshippers here.

- I compiled the questions, and each week I have been answering one of the top 4 questions raised...
 - Question #4 was “How do I know when I’m hearing God’s speak?”
 - Question #3 was “What does the Bible say about Heaven & Hell?”
- But before we get to today’s Question #2, we’ve been looking at a few other kinds of questions, just for fun...
 - We begin with a **“Christmas Question”**... *“Why do we celebrate Christmas on Dec.25? Is that really when Jesus was born?”*
 - No, it probably wasn’t. In fact, the bible doesn’t say when Jesus was actually born. For centuries, ancient people had been observing the Winter Solstice near the end of December.
 - Two pagan events, the Feast of Saturnalia, and the sun-god, Mythra’s birthday, were widely observed by the Roman populace. It wasn’t until the 4th Century that the Christian Church marked December 25th as the Feast Day of the Nativity!
- Next, we have our **“Quick-answer Question”**... *“The Jews used the Hebrew Scriptures. So what language did Jesus teach in?”*
 - Jesus most likely spoke both Hebrew and Aramaic.
 - Aramaic was the language of Persia, Babylon & Assyria... and Jews who were taken into captivity would have learned to speak it before moving back to Israel.
- Third comes the **Fun Question**... “Is it a sin to be totally perfect?”
 - I’d like to answer this... I honestly would... but if you’re totally perfect, you already know the answer to this question, and don’t need me to tell you!
- And finally, our **‘Good Question’ Question**... *“Why aren’t God’s people more grateful?”*
 - The answer to this (and all other ‘good questions’) is... GOOD QUESTION!

- Now, on to the subject at hand...
- Questions #3 and 4 had a fair amount of interest... but questions #2 and 1 were far and away the questions most people wanted answered.
 - Tough Question #2 is: “How did the Bible become the book we have now?”
 - As I try to answer this question, it may seem that, at times, it’s more like a history lecture...
 - But I hope and pray that God’s Spirit will touch your heart through it all, and you’ll come out with not only a deeper appreciation of the Bible, but a greater hunger to spend time with it!

To say that the Bible is not just one book, but a collection of books is just scratching the surface.

- We Protestants recognize 66 books: 39 in the Old Testament & 27 in the New Testament...
 - Our Catholic brothers and sisters have 73 books, while the Orthodox Church is comprised of 78 in total!
 - Using the King James Version, there are 31,102 verses and 1,189 chapters in the entire Bible.
- But more than the sum of its parts, it’s important for us to know HOW the Bible came to be...
 - Is it the literal word of God, with absolutely no errors or contradictions?
 - Is it just a timeless collection of interesting stories that the Church has kept?
- I’d like to start by telling you something about modern Biblical scholarship... and the “Four Document Theory”...

I was first acquainted with this theory when I took my first Old Testament class in seminary.

- Dr. Huffmon was my professor, and he began one lecture by saying, “So you know there are two different creation stories in the Bible, right?”
 - (What do you mean, I thought? Adam & Eve... Garden of Eden... serpent & the forbidden fruit, right?)

- We opened our Bibles to Genesis 1:1... *“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep...”*
- And for each of the next six days, God creates something new each day... Light, the Sky, Earth/Water/Vegetation, Sun/Moon/Stars, Animals, and finally humans.
- (v.31) *“And God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.”*
- The 2nd Creation story begins at Genesis 2:4b... *“In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up – for the LORD God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground... the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.” (v.4b-7)*
 - In this account, man is one of the first things created... then the Garden of Eden... then animals... and eventually woman.
 - This is the story that has the forbidden fruit and that sneaky talking serpent!
- “So which one is the true story,” Dr. Huffmon asked us? “Which one do you believe?”
 - He went on to explain that BOTH stories were important to the Hebrew people because they both shed light into who God is, what the creation is, who we are, and how sin came into the world.
 - So let me tell you about the 4-source theory of the Bible... and I’d like to give credit to Bishop John Spong and his book Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism for his clear description.

For centuries, the stories of the Hebrew people were passed down by word of mouth. That all started to change sometime around the reign of King Solomon (960-920 BCE)...

- For the first time in this nation’s history, they had reached a level of safety & security.
 - Some folks had the leisure of being able to spend their days writing...
 - And so some unknown person in the city of Jerusalem set out to write an **epic story** about how this Jewish nation came into being.
 - The result was the first narrative history of Israel – a sort of Hebrew *Illiad*.

- This writer called God by the name of “Yahweh” in this narrative, and for this reason, the narrative itself is referred to as the **Yahwist (or “J”)** document (for the German spelling of Jahweh).
- The J-document opens with what is now the 2nd creation story and moves through the sagas of Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob & Joseph until it culminates in the account of Moses, who is this writer’s great hero.
- He chronicles a history of his people from slavery to becoming a great nation... a people of promise in whose life Yahweh is constantly intervening to make good the divine word.
- Some 100 years later (about 850BCE), in the northern region of Samaria, another historian began to put together another story of Israel’s life, another interpretation of its history.
 - It suggested that God made the original covenant not with the leaders or Moses or the royal family but with the people, who then chose their leaders and empowered them.
 - The document called God by the name Elohim and for this reason is known as the “**Elohist**” (or “E-source”) document. His work is also an epic and qualifies to be called the Hebrew *Odyssey*. It’s a tale full of romance & emotion.
 - He began his tale not with creation but with Abraham... dwelt on the story of the near-sacrifice of Issac... and passed Isaac quickly to get to Jacob, who was the focus of his tale... along with moving into the Promised Land with Joshua.
 - When Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom, fell to the Assyrians in 721 (a nation who resides in what’s now Northern Iraq), the people were carried into exile & eventually blended into the general population of that foreign land.
 - But some citizens of the northern kingdom did manage to escape captivity and to rescue the Elohist document by taking it to Jerusalem, where, it was eventually merged into the Yahwist narrative.
- Some 230+ years later, another major revision of this sacred story occurred in Jerusalem during the reign of King Josiah, around 621BCE.

- According to tradition, during a period in which repairs were being made on the temple, a scroll of law purporting to have been written by Moses was discovered in the temple.
 - This book, called for the kind of religious reform the famous prophets had been advocating, and it rekindled a kind of national pride that helped to keep this soon-to-be-conquered nation intact through the period of exile.
 - The book was called the second (*deuteron*) giving of the Law (*nomas*) and came to be known as **Deuteronomy**.
 - When King Josiah read the book, he called the nation to a renewed covenant & started a religious reform movement that was the most rigorous in biblical history!
 - Over the next 25 years, the Book of Deuteronomy was added to the Yahwist-Elohism combination, and the newly merged text was edited anew in the light of the deuteronomic insights.
 - The author of Deuteronomy was eager to purify worship... .. reaffirm the Jerusalem priesthood... and to bring the people into a realization of the love Yahweh had for them.
 - He was also a writer of considerable ability and beautiful prose.
 - Their work included Joshua, Judges, I/II Samuel, I/II Kings...and they even touched up the books of the prophets a bit.
 - When they went into Babylonian captivity, they carried this sacred blended story with them.
- In 596BCE the city of Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonian army. King Nebuchadnezzar carried off the best & brightest of the Hebrew people into exile in Babylon.
 - In the ancient world this normally meant the end of a nation's life. In captivity the conquered people tended, after a period of time, to intermarry with their captors and to lose their national identity.
 - [This is exactly what had happened to the people in the Northern Kingdom of Israel 130 years prior by the Assyrians.]
 - For the Southern Kingdom of Judah, this was her defining moment... everything she stood for was put in jeopardy.

- These people were up to the task! Many of the psalms were written while in Babylonian captivity.
- They were initially led by the prophet and priest, Ezekiel... and over the years, other strong priests like Ezra & Nehemiah took over that leadership... thus, it is referred to as the **“Priestly” source!**
- The way these priestly leaders kept the captive Israelites grounded in their faith was by asserting their distinction... the things that made the Jews unique & separate from everyone else... primarily, circumcision & observing the Sabbath.
- This is also when the first creation story was written... the 7-day account, with God resting on that 7th day!
- The Yahwist-Elohist-Deuteronomic version of the Hebrew sacred story was thoroughly edited by these priestly writers to include the ancient priestly traditions and to document the genealogies over the years.

Okay, let's pause here for a moment to make sure we're all on the same page.

- The writings we've talked about so far... the books written & edited by the various sources... were all written in the ancient Hebrew language.
 - There were also writings by some of the prophets... as well as some poetry thrown in for good measure!
 - Again, this was all in Hebrew.
- Then around the 3rd century BCE... the large Jewish population in Alexandria, Egypt came under Greek influence...
 - The people no longer spoke Hebrew or Aramaic in their day-to-day business... and it was harder & harder for the common individual to understand the Scriptures in their original Hebrew.
 - So the faithful Jews put together a new translation of the Hebrew Bible... a Greek version, known as the **Septuagint**.
 - It got its name from the Latin word for “seventy,” because legend had it that 6 people from each of the historical 12 tribes of Israel worked on this translation.
 - And this Septuagint is the oldest copy of the Hebrew Bible that we have, to this day!

Which brings us up to the time of the New Testament...

- It's important to begin with the realization that to our knowledge, Jesus himself never wrote down a single word... (save for the time he is reported to have written in the dirt w/ the woman caught in adultery)...
 - Jesus was a teacher, an oral communicator. He told stories – plain & simple.
 - Jesus had no “PR” person... no manager... not even “press agent.”
 - There were no biographers or paparazzi following him around... no interviews on 60 minutes or stints as Time Magazine's “Man of the Year.”
 - Believe it or not, it was close to 40 years after his death & resurrection that the first Gospels were written!
 - Prior to that, they were passed down by word of mouth, among his followers.
- But before we get too ahead of ourselves, we have to deal with the apostle Paul...
 - The earliest surviving Christian documents are actually some of Paul's letters (written 1-2 decades after the crucifixion).
 - Paul traveled extensively, and helped establish many of the first Christian communities in the Mediterranean region...
 - He then wrote letters of instruction, encouragement & rebuke to specific congregations... these, over time, were distributed & passed on to others, outside the original scope of the letter.
- Of the 13 letters traditionally ascribed to Paul, modern Biblical scholars believe that Paul actually wrote 7 of them... 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, I & II Corinthians, Philippians, Philemon & Romans
 - The others were written by men who used Paul's name...
 - In the ancient world, it was quite common to attach important names to anonymous works – or to write in the name of some teacher or famous person from the past.
 - By the early 2nd century, a collection of Paul's writings had been gathered together and were known by many early church leaders.
- As I mentioned earlier, the first Gospels – the collection of stories from Jesus' life and ministry – weren't written until 40 years after Jesus' crucifixion.

- Christianity produced a ton of literature... much more than is included in our Bible today! In fact, we're aware of at least 63 documents that were circulated as "Gospels" in the numerous church... as well as numerous "Acts," "Epistles," and "Apocalypses."
- Of the 4 Gospels that made it into the New Testament, scholars believe MARK was the first one written, somewhere around 70CE, when the Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem.
- Mark's Christian community, faced with severe persecution, was forced to flee the city... so, as the story goes, Mark put into writing the collection of stories they'd been circulating, so the believers could take it with them!
- Over time, Matthew & Luke followed... and they appear to have known about (and copied portions) of Mark's gospel.
- John came last... and it's written quite differently than the other 3 (which are often referred to as the "synoptic" gospels).
- But it wasn't until the end of the 2nd century that the early church settled on these 4 as the normative gospels for all!
- I find it interesting to note that all of the documents in the New Testament were written without titles!
 - In the process of collecting & editing, they were given titles that may or may not represent original authorship, readership and literary genre.
 - The original authors also didn't write in chapters or verses... these came later, to help with reference.
 - In fact, the first chapter divisions didn't appear until the 13th century... and verses didn't make an appearance until the 16th century!
 - (And while we're on the subject, did you know the original Hebrew writing of the OT didn't even use vowel markings – those came much, much later!)
 - And none of the original manuscripts – in any language (OT or NT) contained punctuation marks! Those were all added by the various editors!
- It was not one person or Church Council that eventually settled on which 27 books of the New Testament would make it into "The Bible"...

- But by the 4th century, in an informal, unofficial process, the continuing Christian community discerned in those 27 documents authentic testimony to who they were as a people of faith!
- They were preserved... read in the church's worship alongside the Jewish scriptures... and finally acknowledged to be authoritative Scripture, while other Christian writings were neglected or consciously rejected.
- Later bishops & councils only confirmed this... but it was the CHURCH that selected the books that became our New Testament.

The New Testament was written in Koine (or 'common') Greek... the language understood by most of the population in the Hellenistic world (they also used the Septuagint version of the OT).

- As Greek began to give way to Latin the Roman Empire, it was only a matter of time until a Latin translation of the Scriptures became the recognized Bible of the church.
 - Written in the early 5th century, this is often referred to as the "Vulgate" Bible... for it contained the language of the common people.
 - And the Old Testament was translated from the original Hebrew, not the Greek Septuagint.
- Close to a thousand years later, with the rise of Protestantism in Europe, scholars within this movement set themselves the task of making the Bible available in the various vernaculars of the time...
 - By 1526 the first parts of two notable translations began to appear: Martin Luther's in German... and William Tyndale's in English.
 - The latter, by way of several subsequent revisions, became the King James Version in 1611... and had been termed "the noblest monument of English prose."
 - The King James remained the "authorized version" for over 200 years...
- But it was not without its defects...
 - By the middle of the 19th century, the development of Biblical studies... and the discovery of many biblical manuscripts more ancient than those on which the King James Version was based...
 - It became apparent that further revisions were needed...

- And so versions such as the British Revised Version... American Standard Version... Revised Standard Version... (and countless others) slowly began to replace the King James Version.
- Christians today have a variety of options for translations... and each have their merits... it's purely the personal choice of the reader!

(Whew!) That's a lot of information, I know... and it may seem quite overwhelming right now... but let me conclude with this...

- When I was in seminary and started to learn these things, some of my classmates had quite a hard time with it.
 - Not that they didn't understand what our professors were teaching us... but that it challenged their long-held assumptions about what the Bible was and how it was formed.
 - The debate continues, in many denominations, about whether or not the Bible is infallible, inerrant, and the 100% Word of God...
 - Personally, I believe with all my heart the Bible contains God's Word... but it was written by human beings... in specific contexts & settings... for specific reasons...
- God has given us brains to think... and minds to reason... and I believe He expects us to use them when it comes to reading the Bible...
 - As Christians, the Bible should be the foundation & bedrock of our faith!
 - And whether a particular passage was written by the J or P-source... or Paul... or someone purporting to be Paul... in the end, it really doesn't matter to me.
 - In the end, I know that this book has stood the test of time... and that believers from across the centuries have come to find value, purpose & strength in these pages.
 - And so I am committed now, more than ever, to rediscovering for myself the power of the Bible.
 - It's amazing to think that God can speak to me every time I open its pages.
 - Thanks be to God. AMEN!