

Lent 3, 2012. Nigel Taber-Hamilton

Each year our bishop, Greg Rickel chooses a Lenten book for the whole diocese to read. This year he chose the bible!

Now I have had to have a chat with him! I think this is a wonderful idea, but reading the bible requires some careful preparation and guidance. If you intend to start at Genesis and finish with Revelation there's a strong chance you'll never make it out of the Old Testament! As the members of our Education for Ministry group found out, the readings we hear in church represent only a small part of the whole bible, and much of the parts we don't get to read are frequently tedious, often very violent, sometimes mystifying, and with disappointing irregularity, fascinating.

So it seemed to me that it's worth giving you a primer on the bible. First of all, how many authors are represented? Some will say "one" – God. Others will say up to a hundred – the individuals and groups who wrote what we call the various so-called books in the bible – which is actually an odd choice of name for each, since the word "bible" comes from "biblion" which means, well, "book"!

Why call them "books" – they're discrete, meaning independent, documents which were originally written on long scrolls. Each book fits on one scroll. So when you get something that's longer than a scroll you go with two scrolls – hence 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, which means "the book of Kings, scroll #1" and so on.

What's the first book of the bible in order of authorship? Probably the book of Amos in the mid 8th Century B.C. The last one was likely Ecclesiastes, around 150 B.C. If you open your bible you'll find that the first is Genesis and the last Malachi, so that tells you that the bible is not organized in date order.

That's confirmed by the New Testament's order, where the first written was 1 Thessalonians and all of Paul's genuine letters – probably 7 of the 13 attributed to him – were written before the Gospels. We don't know when the last New Testament book was written but it could have been any of seven or eight of the books, including the letters of John, of Peter, or the Book of Revelation.

So we have maybe a hundred of authors – many of whom we know little or nothing about – writing in different social contexts, among different tribal groups, clans, nations – many of whom we know little or nothing about – in very different parts of the Mediterranean world, facing different problems, different oppressors, different empires, all over a period of going on a thousand years.

Then you jumble up the historical order, often for seemingly arbitrary reasons.

Finally you add the fact that some of the books are intentionally attacking other books; some books are misleadingly attributed to authors who didn't write them, and say things that contradict

those authors genuine writings; then that some scribes have intentionally added additional sections to some genuine books which undermine those books, and I have to say that “Houston, we have a problem”!

What do you do, for instance, when in the authors of the so-called Pastoral Epistles – 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus WRITING IN ST. PAUL’S NAME AFTER HIS DEATH – denigrate women, calling them “silly”, “idle”, “gossips”, “busybodies”, telling them they should be “submissive to their husbands”, to remain silent in church, and so on? The controlling presupposition is that of a patriarchal society where women are expected to be married, have children, be obedient and submissive wives and loving mothers, and, above all, to play no role in leadership in domestic, religious, or public affairs? THIS IS AN IMPORTANT QUESTION – BECAUSE THE GENUINE PAUL IS VERY DIFFERENT: THE GENUINE PAUL IS A RADICAL EGALITARIAN.

In those letters we can say with a high degree of certainty that Paul did write we find Paul calling various women his “fellow workers” who have “labored side-by-side” with him (Phil 4:2-3; Rom 16:6, 12) – leadership language identical with that he applies to men who lead churches. He calls Phoebe a deacon (Rom 16:1), and describes Junia not just as an apostle (remember that tradition identifies the 12 and Paul as “apostles”) but as “prominent among the apostles” (Rom 16:7).

Paul has egalitarian views on sex, marriage and divorce (1 Cor chapters 1-7). And he uses an egalitarian baptismal formula older, even, than his writings (Gal 3:27-28 – “..no longer Jew or Greek...slave or free....male and female..all of you are one in Christ Jesus”)

Clearly one of those later authors’ purposes was to counter Paul’s radically egalitarian principles and practices with a much narrower, sexist, patriarchal world-view. And the sad thing is that much of the Church for most of the rest of Christian history has mostly unthinkingly accepted what are essentially fraudulent documents as genuine letters of Paul.

So what do you do? Well, Anglicanism has an answer, from its most important theologian, Richard Hooker! Hooker argues that we must apply human reason to our encounters with scripture. Since scripture is anything but simple – a Puritan argument – we should not allow ourselves to be sucked into biblical study without first recognizing the complexities of the task we face.

Biblical studies has, since Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768) recognized the problems of biblical complexity and diversity. For at least the last hundred years comprehensive, sophisticated, and thorough exegetical methods have been developed. If there is any failure in the Church today it is that we have failed to introduce the remarkable results of these methods into the regular life of the Church and the daily lives of Christians.

What do we do here? Well, we are blessed with some remarkable resources. We have Dr. Tom Johnson, who is, as many of you know, a retired professor of New Testament studies. We now also now have Dr. Frank Shirbourn, likewise a retired professor of New Testament studies. Tom has led us in biblical study, and continues to do so. Frank will be doing so in the future.

We also have our Anglican tradition – the third leg of Hooker’s famous 3 legged stool along with Scripture and Reason – which encourages open-mindedness, invites thoughtful study, promotes communal sharing, and embraces a vision of church, theology, and God predicated on a willingness to acknowledge that in the greater scheme of things we know considerably less than we think we know, and thus are open to the new possibilities that for all people of faith lie out in front of us if we are faithful to our core identity as followers of Jesus.

What do you do? Educate yourselves! Frank and Tom and I can recommend plenty of resources that provide introductions to the bible. Read the bible cautiously, remembering the complexities I’ve described.

And on that basis, I say of Greg’s choice of the Bible as the Lenten study book of our diocese, “have at it”! Amen.