

## KNOW YOUR BIBLE

The Bible is composed of a library of 66 books which provide a glimpse into the collective memory of the pilgrim people of the Old and New Testament times. When we read the Bible intelligently and knowingly we learn about the evolution of humanity in those days and since. It records their dealings with life as they came up against sickness, death, violence, politics, justice, love and the constituent crises of existence. Because we are not rid of these critical situations their responses in the Bible may be helpful to us.

However, to appreciate the biblical messages you need to know the context in which your translation was written and expressed. There was no thought in the minds of the writers that they were preparing a Bible for all ages. Each wrote for the temporary passing circumstances of their time. The prophet uttered challenges to rouse or rebuke or comfort the society of the day. The letters of the apostles were for instruction and guidance as they saw it for the troubles of their day in the early churches. As far as the intention of the writers was concerned, the books were for the most part separate and unconnected writings.

For an intelligent reading of the Bible this must be kept in mind. We must try to acquire the habit when reading any book of the Bible of thinking of it as a separate work, and enquiring as to the period it was written, the character of the author, the sort of people for whom it was written, the purpose of the book, and the peculiar circumstances, if any, that inspired its writing. In the Epistles and the Poetical and Prophetical books it is especially important. We will come to see how these different writers,

often with hundreds of years between them, without any designed connection with each other, without any thought they were writing a great lesson book of humanity, presenting us with a progressive view of morality and plan of life.

The Bible was written by human beings spiritually inspired to share their thoughts and knowledge with others. Their message is a mingling of divine knowledge and human expression. Often the personality of the writer is part of the message. St. Paul was a theologian and church builder, a man who had experienced a traumatic religious conversion experience, a man who could well have been a homosexual and not understanding his nature. The writer of the Gospel of St. John was obviously knowledgeable in philosophy and one of the charismatics of the day. The apostle John expresses his experience of love in his three epistles. The first writer of the Old Testament, known as "J", was in likelihood a woman with a whimsical view of God. The Psalmist was a musician. The writer of the Book of

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Job was written by a playwright. The various prophets came from differing backgrounds and individualists.

As the books of the Bible were written at different times over many centuries there is a progression of thought and morality. There was a time and place a man could have several wives, if childless a man could seek to have children of another woman, slavery was accepted, racism was honoured. The Bible is not a textbook of morality but a history of ethics.

Jesus kept reminding the Jews of his day that it was not the letter of the law that was important but the spirit. All matters, he taught, were to be interpreted and dealt with in love. This was his great ethical and religious breakthrough.

We must be careful of belief based upon single biblical texts taken by themselves. Each must be seen within the context in which they were written, taking account of the time and the author.

For instance the writer of the New Testament book of Ephesians states (Eph. 2:8,9): "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not of your own doing...not the results of works, so that no one may boast." Compare this with the declaration in the Book of James (James 2:14): "What good is it my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?"

Each of the above emphasize an aspect of truth. The opposing sides are necessary, limiting and qualifying each other, to make the truth complete.

Read your Bible beginning with the prayer, "*Blessed Spirit of Truth, guide me into all truth.*"

*A book to help you understand the Bible and its background is, "Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism" by John Shelby Spong, HarperSanFrancisco Press, 1991, 258 pages, price \$12.95.*

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