

THE HIDDEN MYSTERIES OF THE BIBLE REVEALED!

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. I have sworn an oath and confirmed it, to observe your righteous ordinances. I am severely afflicted; give me life, O LORD, according to your word. Accept my offerings of praise, O LORD, and teach me your ordinances. I hold my life in my hand continually, but I do not forget your law. The wicked have laid a snare for me, but I do not stray from your precepts. Your decrees are my heritage forever; they are the joy of my heart. I incline my heart to perform your statutes forever, to the end.

Your decrees are wonderful; therefore my soul keeps them. The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple.

(Psalm 119:105-112, 129-130, NRSV)

If you take a walk down the religion aisle at Barnes and Noble, you will find the mysteries of the universe along with the meaning of life laid out before you. Who knew that the secrets hidden by the powers that really control the world could be uncovered in such a mundane place. You don't need to go gallivanting around some ancient crypt or a secret Vatican archive. All you need to do is look one aisle over from the cappuccino machine! I wonder if the Illuminati, the Masons, the Vatican and the C.I.A. are aware that their secrets are just laying out there on display for anyone to find. Many of these "revelations" have to do with the Bible or rather what didn't make it into the Bible. The covers promise to reveal to you what ecclesiastical authorities don't want you to know. These books range from the more

reputable options like *Lost Christianities* by Duke Professor Bart Ehrman to the less reputable ones like Michael Baigent's *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, which Dan Brown used to write *The Da Vinci Code*. Each in its own way argues that what we have in our pew racks and nightstands is not the real story, but merely the "Warren Commission" version of it. The Biblical waters get murkier when we consider the amazing archaeological discoveries made over the last sixty years. Beginning in 1945 with the discovery of the so-called Dead Sea Scrolls, a collection of ancient Jewish religious writings found inside a cave in what was then eastern Palestine, a treasure trove of ancient Jewish and Christian writings has come to light. In the 1950's, another collection of writings was found in Nag Hammadi Egypt. This discovery included writings thought to be used by an early Christian sect called the Gnostics, including gospels different than the ones in the Christian Bible. Other early Christian and ancient Jewish writings have surfaced as greater effort and expense have been put towards finding such texts. Even this year, no less an institution than The National Geographic Society revealed the existence of yet another gospel that tells the story of Jesus from Judas' perspective. With each new discovery, a new set of claims surfaces about how the story of Christianity will be rewritten. Sometimes these claims are legitimate (e.g. the Dead Sea Scrolls tell us more about the religious milieu of Judaism during Jesus' time) and sometimes they are not (e.g. the claim that Jesus and his disciples ate a bunch of hallucinogenic mushrooms and made it all up).

One big irony in regards to much of this stuff is that—excepting the most outlandish conspiracy theories—the vast majority of the "hidden" books are not very hidden at all. Not only do they make up their own section of the book store, but they have been the province of scholars and academics for decades and even centuries. An introductory course on the Bible in college or seminary can get one

started towards investigating the incredible history of scholarship on the Bible. It is unfortunate, however, that so little of the good scholarship actually makes it down to the popular level.

What is the average book store browser to make of all these claims and counterclaims?

My first response to this question would be to tell folks that you don't have to "make" anything of this section of the bookstore, especially when most people haven't actually bothered to read the Bible itself. The popularity of much of the pulp that's out there regarding the Bible shows that most people approach the Bible in the same manner I approached my high school English classes. Instead of actually reading *Romeo and Juliet* or *Les Miserables*, I bought the Cliff's Notes or I rented the movie version. I ended up talking in class or even writing a paper about something I had not actually read for myself.

The avalanche of material, both legitimate and farcical, can leave a person intimidated. This is the book that we swear oaths on after all. One may wonder if this serious and weighty book is not really for an average person with everyday concerns. A look around our sanctuary reveals how we may unconsciously see the Bible as something unapproachable. On our altar table, we have a really large Bible; likewise on our lectern. As pretty as they are, in and of themselves, they look about as inviting as one of those giant dictionaries you see on their own stands. The Bible was meant to be revered but not left on a pedestal.

The works of Shakespeare can be a deluxe leather-bound collection kept behind glass in a private library or individual dog-eared paperbacks read on subway trains. In regards to scholarship, a person can enjoy Shakespeare's *Othello* without reading Harold Bloom first or for that matter without

reading the various theories about Shakespeare ripping off Christopher Marlowe. Similarly, one can read the Bible all by itself and walk away with great spiritual gain. Understanding the historical context of a particular book of the Bible may provide a greater depth of meaning and indulging in the more fanciful stuff can be entertaining, but there's enough in the Bible that is readily accessible to keep an average reader occupied for an eternity. As our scripture passage for today says, "the unfolding of [God's] words...imparts understanding to the simple."

Unfortunately, the Bible remains for most people of faith an unknown quantity, one book among many on a dusty bookshelf. The philosopher Hans Gadamer drew a distinction between an "art object" and a "work of art." He wrote that an art object is only a physical object like a statue or painting or musical score. It is just one object in a world of objects. Yet, it becomes a work of art when it is contemplated or performed. The work of art only exists when it is a part of a person's or community's existence.¹ It is only "alive" when it is a part of life. For many Christians, the Bible is just an "art object" that really does not "exist" in any significant sense in their everyday lives.

The responsibility for the Bible's lack of significance lies largely at the feet of the Church. Often, the particular contents of the Bible—its words and stories—are considered the domain of children only. They learn about the Bible in Sunday School as a part of their training to become culturally literate and moral adults. Sermons are a means for adults to engage scripture, but I'm the first to tell you that most sermons have many agendas—interpreting scripture is only one of them. Most often, the Bible is little more than church décor, as in our lectern and altar Bibles. On the other extreme, of course, are our more conservative brothers and sisters who treat the Bible as if it contained the secrets to weight loss, stock market investing, quantum physics and the

American foreign policy. They may use the Bible more often, but in their own way, they trivialize and ultimately marginalize the Bible too.

Psalms 119, from which we read a few verses this morning, reveals to us the great resource we are missing out on by disregarding the Bible. It is an acrostic poem arranged in twenty-two sections, one for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet, with eight verses in each of the sections. The psalm celebrates all of the ways that God has revealed God's self to God's people. Those ways include not only scripture but also tradition, natural law and experience of the divine.² Today's verses speak of God's words as a light to guide us on our life's journey. A significant source of that light is the Bible. Why is it that we so often choose to stumble on in the dark without the help it offers?

Fundamentally, I believe the Church's underwhelming presentation of the Bible has to do with the packaging. I'm not talking about the particular cover art or the quality of the imitation leather that publishers have used on Bibles, rather I'm talking about the fact that we present the Bible and conceptualize the Bible as if it were a single book. It was not always so. Each of the writings in this book once existed as a solitary piece of writing in the form of a scroll. If you've ever been to a Jewish synagogue service and seen the ark open up to reveal the Torah scrolls, this idea may have dawned on you. Perhaps, just thinking about the Bible not as one book but a collection of writings might help us to think about the wealth of perspectives and resources it contains. We do not use our imaginations enough when considering what the Bible has to offer.

Rather than one book, we have a compendium of books packaged in one neat container. It was never meant to be read cover to cover. (I defy you to do so. You'll get bogged down somewhere around Leviticus and give up.) In fact, it

did not exist with covers until the Church over centuries decided what would be in its canon and technology advanced to the point where books could be made. Between these covers, we have not one book by many. Just consider what the Bible contains:

- an account of the beginning of the universe and the first humans (Genesis)
- the story of God choosing a particular family of people who would grow into a nation and of God freeing them from bondage (Genesis and Exodus)
- the laws and rituals of these people (Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy)
- military battles and intrigue (Joshua and Judges)
- political corruption and nobility, success and failure (1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles)
- stories of inspirational women (Ruth and Esther)
- stories of rebuilding a nation after calamity (Ezra and Nehemiah)
- a dialogue on the suffering of innocent people (Job)
- a contemplation of the meaning of existence that would make Sartre despair (Ecclesiastes)
- a magnificent collection of songs that often speak with brutal honesty (Psalms)
- a collection of wisdom that puts Ben Franklin to shame (Proverbs)
- an explicit love poem that would be sold today in a brown paper wrapper (Song of Songs)
- seventeen books of prophetic oracles written in amazing poetic language about the justice of God and hope for the future (the prophets)
- four different accounts of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John)
- a history of the first Christians (Acts of the Apostles)

- a collection of twenty-one letters written by the leaders of the early Church that cover everything from childcare to the end of the world (the letters of Paul, James, John, Peter, Jude and Hebrews)
- speaking of the end of the world, we've got an account of that too (Revelation).

Sixty-six different writings are in this one volume (more if you happen to be Roman Catholic or Orthodox), and the variety of material is great enough for anyone to find something suited to their taste.

A chief advantage of understanding the Bible as a collection of writings rather than one book is that just as there is room for different tastes there is also room for different understandings of God and how God works in the world. The Oxford professor John Barton has a really wonderful little book called *What is the Bible?* In it, he takes note of the disparate takes on God found within the Bible itself. With tongue firmly planted in cheek, he writes:

If even Shakespeare's plays have a certain unity of style and theme, how much more would one expect *The Collected Works of God* to tell a single consistent story?³

Unlike our Muslim brothers and sisters that understand their holy book, The Qur'an, to be dictated directly from God and our evangelical Christian brothers and sisters who believe basically the same thing about the Bible, I would offer that the strength of this library of writings is its diversity of opinion and belief rather than an externally imposed unity. The works found in the Bible are in dialogue with one another and they invite us into that dialogue. Rather than containing one list of prescriptions for life, the Bible contains a world of ideas about God's care for humanity.

We are invited into that world and to add our own voice to the chorus. We can join the authors of these works who wrote about their encounters with God in different centuries, cultures and languages. Furthermore, we join the untold multitude of believers throughout the centuries that have also read these writings in their attempts to make sense of their own experience of God.

Even presenting the Bible in this fashion, as a collection of various genres and theological perspectives, can leave a person intimidated. Where does one begin? There are as many starting places as there are words in the Bible and people to read them, yet some places are better than others. Since we're Christians, a nice place to begin is with one of the accounts of Jesus' life. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John can each be read in total over a day or two. Yet, a few paragraphs a day may be enough for a start. The great history of Christian spirituality is largely based upon people doing just that—reading a bit of scripture each day and praying for God to reveal something to you along the way. Your private reading might inspire you to seek out people who want to share their own spiritual journey with scripture. Our church offers some opportunities for that and allows the freedom for people to create their own if we don't offer what you're looking for. Of course, all this begins with cracking the cover in the first place.

The scripture read today from the Bible is a few verses from Psalm 119, an amazing poetic tribute to the ways God speaks to us through scripture and other means. In it, the writer notes that God's words offer a light to see by and understanding even to simple people. Especially in the trials of life, the psalm says, God's words offer us hope and strength. One of the primary ways we can hear God's words to us is through the scripture handed down to us through the ages. The words of the Bible are both more sensational and more accessible than we give them credit for. They are not

hidden nor are they a mystery. They are a means of God's grace, love and presence available to people like me and you. Amen.

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PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal One, giver of light and life to us, open our souls to the many ways you offer us guidance. Make us aware of the great resource we have in our scriptures. Create in us a love for the wealth of tradition and the diversity of perspectives they contain. We are grateful for the permission you give to us to reflect upon and consider the many ways our spiritual ancestors have understood you. Draw us closer to you through all the words you speak to our souls. In the name of Christ, the Word made flesh, we ask these things, Amen.

¹ Although I'm talking about Gadamer here, I haven't read this particular work from which this idea comes: Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2d rev. ed. Translated and Revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989). I'm relying upon the summary provided by Sandra Schneiders. Sandra Schneiders, *Relevatory Text* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991): 42.

² This understanding of Psalm 119 comes from Jon Levenson as cited in J. Clinton McCann, Jr. "Psalms" in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996): 4:1167.

³ John Barton, *What is the Bible?* (London: Triangle/SPCK, 1991): 23