



# TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*on the Branford Green*

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Sermon preached by Rev. Sharon Gracen

October 31 2010

## Who Wrote the Bible?

Who wrote the Bible? That is a perpetual and perplexing question. For many people, the answer is clear and simple – God wrote it. The Bible is not just the word of God, but the words of God, a divine dictation with human scribes. That is generally not the way Episcopalians approach scripture. We tend to look at the Bible much like a painting by Georges Seurat, the renowned French painter of the pointillist school. He studied the science of color and then put that knowledge to use in his now famous paintings. He discovered that two small blobs of color put next to each other will be seen by the human eye and brain as another color. His paintings were not created by languid, poetic brush strokes but by individual dots or points of color and up close that what they look like – small individual color moments, each with its own integrity, texture and luminosity. It is only when you take a step back, and then several more, that you can see the whole story.

Stepping back from the Bible allows us to see the story of a people drawn into a new kind of relationship with the Divine. It is primarily a story of love and God's repeated attempts to help that people understand what God is up to. The crafting of that story is cloaked in mystery. Biblical scholars rack up PhD after PhD with the study of the language, the vocabulary, the syntax, the structure, the imagery and the theology of it all. And the best we have is good theories and frameworks with which to study these timeless texts.

Early critical study of the Bible began with the Torah, the five books of Moses – so named because he presumably wrote them – from Genesis to Deuteronomy. From early on, however, people noticed things in the books that either seemed to contradict Moses as the author, or at least, be unlikely, not the least of which is the account of Moses' death. There were contradictions, a list in Genesis of kings who were not yet born; Moses was described as going into the Tabernacle in the chapter preceding the building of the Tabernacle. And there is the description of Moses as the humblest of men, an unusual thing for a humble man to say about himself. And of course, there is the statement in Deut. "There never arose another prophet in Israel like Moses..." It was Thomas Hobbes, the 17<sup>th</sup> century philosopher who stated outright that Moses did not write the majority of the Books of Moses.

It was the curious presence of something called a "doublet" that really got modern biblical criticism going in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. A doublet is a story that appears twice, like the two creation stories which are back to back in Genesis, two stories of the naming of Isaac, and Sarah, well into her nineties, is so gorgeous and alluring that she is taken into kingly harems, not once but twice! And there are many others. One of the things that became apparent as these doublets were studied is that in each one of the pair a different name for God is used and those names are consistent if you line up all the doublets. One column uses Yahweh and the other one uses God. This was a smack to the forehead moment for biblical scholars. It had been there all the time, just waiting to be seen. Eventually scholars began to agree that these doublets came from different sources, different communities that had told the stories differently. At some time, they

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were all brought together and instead of making a choice about which was the right way to tell the story, they were both included – an early example of both/and thinking rather than either/or. The best idea that I have heard about when that might have been, is during the years of captivity in Babylon. As the community strived to survive, they did so by telling their stories. Those who had come from the Northern Kingdom had one way of telling the story and those from the South had another. Sometime after the people of Israel were set free and returned to Jerusalem the work of the editors happened. They showed no partiality but with respect for the traditions and skillful weaving, none of the stories was left out. They sit there side by side in messy contradiction and challenge us to hear the word between the words.

The “who wrote the Bible?” question is relevant to this morning’s readings because all is not as it seems. First the book of the prophet Isaiah is kind of like the Trinity, three in one. Scholars of this longest book in the Bible recognize that there are three different voices and time periods represented. The first is Isaiah of Jerusalem, one of the 8<sup>th</sup> century prophets and he plied his prophet wares during the reign of four kings of Judah. Hear the opening words, a lament by God. “Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth; for the Lord has spoken: I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner; and the donkey its master’s crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.” For nearly 39 chapters, Isaiah tries to help the nation return to God’s vision. That’s first Isaiah and this morning we heard his warning to lead ethical lives, not saying one thing in church and then ignoring it during the week.

Second Isaiah, from chapters 40-55 presupposes an audience living in captivity in Babylon. The prophet gives them a message of comfort and the hope of deliverance. Chapters 56-66 may be the same author for the voice is similar but the setting is different – Israel has returned to Jerusalem where life, though free, is very difficult. The vision of Third Isaiah promises the coming of prosperity and the time to forget the shame of captivity. It is a passage from this Isaiah that Jesus read in the synagogue: “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he sent me to bring good news...”

And then we come to Paul, that evangelist and church planter. He is truly the architect of Christianity. His letters are how we know about the early church. It is frustrating that we have only a portion of what he wrote. New Testament scholars point to several of his letters as compilations of parts of letters, some are deemed fully authentic, like 1 Thessalonians. And then there are letters considered to be pseudonymous – written in Paul’s name, but clearly with different vocabulary, tone and message. Our reading today, from 2 Thessalonians is one of those letters. Where 1 Thessalonians is a warm letter of encouragement for a young church, 2 Thessalonians is a pretty much a rant about the end times, which were due any minute. To our modern ears, the idea of someone writing, as if he were Paul, sounds like forgery. It was not considered so in those days. Only seven of the fourteen letters attributed to Paul are considered to be his authentic voice. And that voice is truly an extraordinary witness for the Kingdom of God in opposition to the kingdoms of the earth. The other letters, even though they are probably not by Paul, are no less inspired. Ephesians and Colossians have some of the most glorious theology.

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We can spend lots of time looking at the clues to the authorship of any part of the Bible but that might miss the point. We serve it best when we step back and let the story of what God is doing in the world become visible. And what God is doing is this...holding firm the original Divine idea of a beautiful creation, made with order and balance and love and justice. God continues to invite humankind into that vision through the law and the prophets and most personally in Jesus. And every day God works through us, the Body of Christ, to transform and renew all that is so very good.