

## **The Holy Bible**

*(Paper for Project Abraham – Booklet Revision 2007)*

Although it is often regarded as a single volume, the Holy Bible (literally ‘*The Book*’, sometimes referred to as the Holy Scriptures) is a collection of texts written over many centuries by a variety of authors. Christians agree on the core collection (*canon*) of 66 books: 39 in what has commonly been called the Old Testament but is now frequently called the Hebrew Scriptures; and 27 in the New Testament. There is also a smaller secondary collection of works called the Apocrypha, which is not universally included. Considering its antiquity, and the historical, cultural, linguistic, and geographical spread of the Church, this common agreement on the text of the Bible is quite remarkable.

The Hebrew Scriptures consist of the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. These texts, including key ethical material such as the 10 Commandments, have been inherited from Judaism. They form the bulk of the Bible and reflect the Jewish origins of Christianity. The Hebrew Scriptures are as much a part of the Bible as are the Gospels of the New Testament and remain part of the teaching and practice of the Church.

The New Testament, or New Covenant, covers the ministry of Jesus Christ and the birth of the early Church. More recent than the Hebrew Scriptures, these books were also written over a period of time by a variety of authors in a range of literary styles. The books are broadly divided into Gospels (stories of Jesus’ ministry) and Epistles (letters to the early church).

The canon of the Bible was debated by various ecumenical councils up to about the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE. While some commentators want to construct a centuries long conspiracy to exclude some texts and include others (a la the ‘Da Vinci Code’), the principles used to make the selection were authenticity, acceptance in the community, and witness to Jesus Christ.

Christians believe that the Bible as a whole is a sustained and consistent witness to God’s engagement in human history from the beginning of Creation through to the end of the ages. Rather than a uniform, linear text book it is a contextual witness to Jesus Christ as God’s singular and lasting expression of love for humanity and for the world. It is an ancient text that was not written to comply with modern literary standards, although recent scholarship has been very useful in exploring its content, history, and meaning.

Today the Bible is often criticised because it contains many ugly and to us unpalatable stories, including extreme violence, genocide, and large scale slaughter. These are not unique to the Bible but a sad part of human history. The text is not ‘politically correct’ for modern ears but remains a frank exposé of the evil outcomes of human actions. It depicts a long term encounter with God who despite every setback does not stop loving human beings. Christians regard it as a book of hope and an inspiration for daily living.

Today the Bible is read in a huge variety of languages, and translation work is still going on. Most Christians want to be able to read this book in their own tongue. Obviously the work of translation can give rise to variations of meaning, but translations are carefully compared with the original Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic texts. The Bible is the Bible in whatever language it is translated into. Christians are encouraged to read it daily, and discuss it in their Church communities. 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians still read, sing, preach, and pray the Bible in worship. They are part of a long line of believers, a vast community of the faithful, who have believed the Word of God and are united in their common faith.

‘Word of God’ is a term frequently used in conjunction with the Bible. This concept is not understood in the same way among all Christians, which is probably inevitable as it is an attempt

to describe a divine reality in human terms. It helps to know something about how Christians understand God's interaction with the world and with humanity. Like Jews and Muslims, Christians believe in only one God, the Creator and origin of everything that is. God didn't just create the world, however, and then step back and watch it from a distance. In the Biblical narrative God spoke and it was so (e.g. Genesis 1:3). That is, God's Word creates that which it speaks. Creation is an ongoing event as God's creative Word continues to speak. Christians understand that engagement with the world to be so complete that God entered the world as a human being, Jesus Christ, the Word of God spoken into the world (John 1:1-9). The term 'Word of God' pre-eminently refers to Jesus Christ. The Bible is God's witness to Christ, inspired by God's Holy Spirit. Therefore the Bible is 'Word of God' in that it is God's witness to Jesus Christ.

In this way Christians talk about the Bible as inspired, and regard God as its author. They also speak of the Bible as '*revelation*'. Although some interpret revelation as a sort of divine dictation to human authors, with God directly telling them what to write, most Christians are more flexible in their understanding of the concept. The revelation and inspiration of the Bible are generally understood in terms of relationship, encounter, narrative, faith, and the Spirit, rather than as a mechanical process. The Bible is both a divine book and a human book at the same time, and the two cannot be separated. This is parallel to the Christian doctrine of Jesus Christ as both true God and true Man. While they might prefer some sections to others, Christians are obliged to accept the whole Bible without removing or altering parts of it. Even the current proliferation of translations hasn't changed this, as they only become acceptable to the community and widely used when it is shown that they are faithful to the meaning of original texts.

Christians continue to use the Bible in their worship, community life, morality, ethics, to determine doctrine, and to engage with the society of the day. While their faith is based on Jesus Christ, many of the ethical tenets contained in the Bible are held in common with other religions. Christians have no claim to a monopoly on morality, so they can and should work productively with others to instil a culture of peace, justice, and non-violence. They do this because the Bible speaks to them of the limitless love of God, and as they are loved, so they are to give love in return. Drawing on the Great Shema of Deuteronomy 6 the New Testament commands Christians to love God and to love their neighbour as themselves. One outcome of this in Australia today must be effective and ongoing work with other religions to promote an Australian society structured on key principles of justice and peace.

### **About the author**

*John Henderson* has been the General Secretary of the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) since January 2002. The Council includes 15 Australian national Church members, including a range of Protestant and Orthodox Churches, and the Catholic Church. The role of the Council is to help Churches work together and express their unity in faith. It is engaged in a range of theological and social issues, including international aid and development, refugees and asylum seekers, Indigenous Reconciliation, interfaith dialogue, and building a culture of peace.

He is an ordained pastor of the Lutheran Church, and has served in parishes in South Australia, Queensland, and Victoria. Since 2002 he has been involved in setting up the Australian National Dialogue of Christians, Muslims, and Jews, and part of the Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations. In 2004 he was a participant in regional Interfaith Dialogue in Indonesia and again in 2006 in the Philippines. He represents the NCCA at the World Council of Churches and the Christian Conference of Asia.

### **Suggested Research Questions**

- What makes a particular text holy for each faith?
- Which particular texts are held in common by Jews, Christians, and Muslims and what is their content?
- What status does each faith give to its sacred texts?
- How is each text used in community worship?
- How is each holy text interpreted for today's situation? Who or what is the authority?
- What moral and ethical principles do these texts hold in common?

### **Suggested Comprehension Questions**

- What is the New Testament?
- Why is the Bible translated into many languages?
- What collection of books makes up the largest part of the Bible?
- Why does the Bible tell stories that are not palatable to modern tastes?
- Do Christians think the Bible is a divine or a human book?
- What does Revd Henderson believe is the central theme of the Bible?

### **Suggested Group Activities**

- Have in your group a printed copy of each of the Torah and Talmud, the Holy Bible, and the Holy Quran.
  - How are each of these books presented? E.g. layout, artwork, size, print style.
  - What language is each one written in?
  - How have they changed in the experience of group members?
  - Have you ever held in your hands a copy of the holy book of the other two faiths?
- Discuss in your group:
  - What in these books brings us together? What in these books divides us?
  - How have you heard these books used to create peace? How have you heard them used to create division?
  - What place do our holy books have in interfaith dialogue and discussion?

### **Suggested Websites** (not necessarily endorsed by the author)

- Catholic Encyclopaedia: The Bible at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02543a.htm>
- The Bible Society in Australia at <http://www.biblesociety.com.au/>
- Wikipedia: The Bible at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bible>
- Christianity Site at <http://www.christianitysite.com/TheBible.htm>
- Any Google Search on The Bible will turn up countless sites.

### **Glossary of Terms**

- *Apocrypha* – a collection of 15 books sometimes included with the canon of the Bible
- *Great Shema* – Deuteronomy 6:4, 5 <sup>4</sup>“Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. <sup>5</sup> You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”
- *Da Vinci Code* – popular fictional novel depicting a massive deception by the Church to suppress elements of the faith, leading to the distortion of doctrine and history.
- *Doctrine* – official teaching of the Christian Church.
- *Gospel* – literally “Good News”. Christians use it to mean the Good News of Jesus Christ, e.g. John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”