

# The Most Misunderstood Book In The World?

By: Philip Legge RNC, CH, CDMT

**W**hat was the first book to be printed on a printing press? Which book has been translated into more languages than any other book? Which book has been the foundational part of Western democratic civilization? What book is the most widely printed and read book in the history of the world? As you probably know, this book is what we call the 'Bible'.

Many people throughout the world honor and respect the Bible. However, in some parts of the world the Bible is hated. And other people don't care either way. Another interesting fact about the Bible, is that it has probably been the most misunderstood book in the world!

## LEATHER SCROLLS, BUT NO BOOKS

In this article we would like to look at the history of this very unique book over the last approximately 3,500 years, and what it has meant to people throughout that time, and how it impacted their lives. For example, Christians in the first century had a totally different concept of the Bible than what we have today. In the first century the Bible wasn't even a book, and it was not called the Bible! In fact, in the first century there were **no books** as we know them today. Scribes and scholars wrote on parchment or papyrus, and rolled it around a piece of wood and called it a '**scroll**'. Very few people could read and write during the approximately 1,500 years that the Bible was being written. What we know as the Bible today originally consisted of hundreds of different scrolls, some of which were written in Hebrew by the Jewish prophets, and some were written in Greek by the Christian Apostles.

What is now called the 'Old Testament' are the writings of the Jewish prophets beginning with Moses, that were written in Hebrew over the period of about 1,500 years before Jesus was born. The word 'testament' does not even appear in these writings. The word 'testament' can mean covenant, agreement, contract, plan or will. The Jewish prophets called their writings the 'Word of the Lord', or the 'Word of God', or 'the law and the prophets'. These holy writings were written by hand in the Hebrew language on animal skins which were called 'parchments'. The animal skins, or leather was rolled up around a piece of wood. The

largest of these scrolls measured up to 150 feet in length. Sheep are about 2 to 3 feet long, so it would take a whole flock of sheep to make enough leather for one of these long scrolls! These Hebrew writings which we now call the 'Old Testament' contain 39 different books. They were written by over two dozen prophets over a period of about 1,500 years on hundreds of scrolls. Each piece of parchment or leather might only contain a part of a book, unless it was attached to other pieces of leather to make a longer scroll.

## WHO COULD READ THE SCROLLS?

Another interesting fact is that for over 3,000 years most people **did not have the opportunity** to read these scrolls! The Jewish priests, scribes, and religious leaders were responsible for protecting the scrolls, and for copying them onto new parchment as the old scrolls wore out. The scrolls were considered holy, and of great value. The average person had no access to the scrolls, and they were not bought and sold like the Bibles we have today. The priests and religious leaders were the only people who could read the 'Word of the Lord', and they would publicly read from these scrolls in their meetings and gatherings. This was the only connection that most Jewish people had with these writings, and so people tried to remember or memorize as much as they could while they were listening to them being read.

For the first 1500 years after Jesus' resurrection, many Jewish and Gentile Christians did not read, or even listen to the Hebrew Old Testament being read. The reason for this was that they didn't have *access* to the scrolls either, because it was only the Jewish priests, scribes and religious leaders that had the opportunity to look at the scrolls. In the case of the Gentile Christians, even if they could hear a scroll being read, they wouldn't understand it because it was in the foreign language of Hebrew! However, the Apostles and some of the first century Christians could have read the 'Septuagint', which was a Greek translation of the Old Testament Scriptures.

## APOSTLE'S LETTERS FOR EVERYONE!

The Jewish and Gentile Christians were **dependent upon the Apostle's letters**

for written teaching and instruction. The Apostles wrote in Greek because it was many people's second language, and it was understood in many different countries from the western Mediterranean and east almost to the borders of India! The Apostles reviewed and summarized important teachings from the Hebrew Old Testament writings so that the Christians would understand what had happened in the past with God's relationship with people. The Apostles called the Hebrew writings the 'Scriptures', or 'the law and the prophets', or the 'Word of the Lord', and the 'Old Testament'. The Apostles wrote about a new covenant, or agreement, testament or contract between God and people which began with Jesus' death. This new covenant was not just for Jews, but **included Gentiles as well**, and relied on Jesus' sacrifice for sins rather than on keeping the Old Testament law. The Apostle's writings eventually became known as the 'New Testament', in contrast with the Hebrew writings which were known as the 'Old Testament'.

When the Apostles wrote the 27 books of the New Testament they did it by hand on papyrus which is made from plants, or on parchment which is made from animal skins. The papyrus was made from crushed and flattened reed-like plants. The sheets of papyrus were usually tied together rather than being rolled up like a scroll. The word 'Bible' comes from the same Greek word as 'papyrus'. The average length of the parchment scrolls was 20 to 35 feet, and they were wrapped around a piece of wood just like the Old Testament scrolls. Scrolls were usually big and heavy, yet delicate and easily damaged. In addition, the scrolls and papyrus only contained small portions of the Word of God, and therefore people had a limited and piecemeal view of God's Word. People were dependent upon hearing small portions of God's Word read in public by a religious leader. In most cases, they had no opportunity to read or study the Scriptures at home with their family. It's hard to understand how these long, bulky scrolls were written on, and then transported, stored and preserved. Every time the parchment was unrolled, read and re-rolled, it would become more brittle and start to deteriorate, making it harder and harder to read the words. The parchment and papyrus

were constantly being copied over onto new parchment or papyrus to preserve the message of the Apostle's writings, just like the Jewish scribes were doing with the Old Testament scrolls.

Down through the centuries, people have given up their lives to read and distribute the Scriptures. Many have sacrificed so much to hear and understand God's living words of truth and life. By 500 A.D. the Bible had been **translated by hand into several hundred different languages!** However, by 600 A.D. the Bible was only translated into Latin, and all other translations were eventually destroyed and banned. Throughout this period of the 'Dark and Middle Ages' which lasted until the 15<sup>th</sup> century, most people could not read the Bible, or benefit from hearing it read because they didn't understand Latin!

### **LIGHT OVERCOMES DARKNESS**

John Wycliffe who was an Oxford professor, was the first man to translate the Bible into English. In the 1380's A.D. he completed his hand-written English translation of the Bible. In the 1450's A.D. Johann Gutenberg invented the printing press in Mainz, Germany. The first book ever printed on a printing press was a Latin language Bible! The first printing of the New Testament in German was done by Martin Luther in 1522, and he translated and printed the Old Testament in the 1530's. William Tyndale printed the first English translation of the New Testament in 1525-1526. For the first time in history printing presses **made books available** for people to read rather than scrolls! Between the 1500's and 1800's there was a gradual increase in the number of people who could read and write, because now there were books available for people to read! By the 1900's it was quite common in the Western world for people to own both the Old and New Testaments in one book, which was called the 'Holy Bible'. The printing press changed the whole world, and now because of it the average person can have all of God's written communications with people. From the writings of Moses in the Old Testament to the Apostle John's Revelation in the New Testament. This is the first time in human history that this has been possible!

The light of the Bible gradually brought the Dark Ages to an end in the countries where people were allowed to read the Bible. The countries that have been open to the Bible in the last 200 - 300 years have slowly become more responsible and more

democratic than most countries in history. England, United States, Canada and most of Western Europe are examples of this. The people in these countries have experienced a higher level of peace and freedom overall from their governments, than countries that have not been influenced by the Bible.

All of us today in the Western world have the opportunity to read God's Word at home with our family. It is sad, but true, that many families do not realize this honoured position. It is indeed a privilege that God has allowed us to have His complete inspired Word, from Genesis to Revelation in our homes!

### **PARALLEL BIBLES**

To understand the Bible we believe that it's helpful to read a **parallel Bible** that includes the King James Version and the New King James Version, along with the modern translations of the New American Standard, the New International Version, and the New Living Translation. However, the modern translations omit about 49 verses from the New Testament, or put these verses in brackets. There are also many phrases or words that the modern translations leave out, and many of these are not noted. That is why it's important to have a parallel Bible with the King James Version to see what is not included. The only way to know if something has been omitted is to compare it with the King James Version. By the way, the King James Version is the most printed book in the history of the world, and the only book with one billion copies in print!

The important advantage of the modern translations, which cannot be overlooked, is that the grammar, the sentence structure and the meaning of the words makes the message much clearer. The Christian readers, and listeners in the first century who understood Greek would have clearly understood the message of the Apostles, and that should be our goal today. Many people who grew up studying the King James Version only, have found a great benefit from using a parallel Bible with the King James Version and the modern translations side by side.

### **GOD'S PERSONAL LETTERS TO US**

The Hebrew Scriptures, or what is called the Old Testament, gives us the history of the world and the history of God's relationship with the Jewish people. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John give us the history of Jesus' life and teachings, His death and His resurrection. The Acts of the Apostles provides the history of the early

days of the body of Christ, or the church, from the time of Jesus' ascension to Heaven until Paul's sea voyage to Rome. Revelation Chapter 4 to the end of Revelation, shows us prophecies of future events, and the new Heaven and the new earth. The focal point in the middle, from Romans chapter 1 to Revelation chapter 3, describes how we are to live a **new life of unselfish love** today. These 21 letters from the Apostles to the Christians, plus the 7 short letters from the Apostle John in the second and third chapters of Revelation, give us our foundation and our strength to live a transformed life. All of these personal letters are **from God's heart, to our heart!** These are God's personal writings and instructions to Christians, written by His five chosen Apostles – Paul, Peter, James, John and Jude. Most of the Apostles identify themselves by name, and they also identify the people they are writing to by name. This makes their writings very personal compared to other writings in Scripture where the author's and the reader's names were not usually mentioned. It is interesting that these writings from Romans chapter 1 to Revelation chapter 3 provide enough history of the past, and enough information about the future to satisfy our needs for character change and for spiritual growth in the present!

### **THE BIBLE CAN BE DANGEROUS**

During the 1300's to the 1500's the Bible was translated into English and German, but the people responsible for the translations were often **hunted down, and imprisoned or even killed.** Today in some countries, people risk their lives to distribute, translate, and own Bibles. These people realize that we need the living, breathing, life-saving words of God in our mind and heart, on a daily basis. There are about 40 countries today where the Bible is restricted or banned, and another 13 countries where the government is hostile towards the Bible. About 100 million Christians experience various degrees of persecution today in about 60 countries around the world. The Bible has been the political and moral foundation for many responsible, democratic governments like England, United States, Canada and much of Western Europe. Governments that oppose the Bible are sometimes more violent and dictatorial by comparison in ruling their population.

Sadly, some people in the Western world have gotten used to having the Bible readily available, and perhaps owning many different translations of it in their




home. This familiarity makes it easy for us to consider the Bible commonplace nowadays. Do we appreciate and treasure the life-giving words of the Apostles, like the first Christians did? Are Christians today different from Christians in the first century? Do we have different attitudes and characters than they did? Yes, in many ways we are different from the first century Christians.

## THE FIRST CENTURY CHRISTIANS

The first century Christian's lives and characters were rooted in understanding and *being united* with Jesus' life, and death and resurrection. When the Holy Spirit was given at Pentecost, the believers were given the power and understanding to live a whole new life, with a personality of love and forgiveness and unselfishness that literally shook the world! Never before in human history have we seen such an outpouring of God's love where hundreds of thousands of people gladly shared everything they had with others, and laid down their lives for each other!

The good news is that everything can change for us today as well when we daily *live* in the Apostle's letters, and develop a spiritual *heart-to-heart* relationship with them. A good place to start is Paul's letters to the Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians, because they focus on character transformation. Also Peter's letters, and James' and John's letters focus on the same character change to become more like Jesus' character of unselfish love and forgiveness.

In our next article we will be talking about the **most important muscle** in the body because it works 24/7. What connection does this muscle have with our feelings and emotions? Find out in the next issue of the Rural Route magazine. Don't miss it! 



The above article was written by Philip Legge, who is the founder of Legge Fitness Superstores. Legge Fitness Superstores is located in **Listowel and Fergus Ontario**. For more information, please call 1-800-695-7338 or email [info@leggefitness.com](mailto:info@leggefitness.com). Visit their website [www.leggefitness.com](http://www.leggefitness.com) to view their full line of health and fitness products and services.



Our photo of the month was taken by Linda Glass Ward from Harriston.

Readers are welcome to submit photos for this feature. Send photos, along with photographer's name and address to [editor@theruralroute.ca](mailto:editor@theruralroute.ca)





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