

INTRODUCTION

The Bible is a messy collection. In its original form it had no chapters, no verses, and no punctuation; all the words ran together. It was a real art to know where to separate everything, where put a period and begin another sentence.

The Bible consists of seventy-two books of varied style, running the gamut from history to fiction to poetry. We don't know who the majority of authors were—and this includes the gospel writers. It's probably safe to say that each book was written by a "committee" over a long period of time. Each is a composite venture with many authors who enlarged, amended, edited, changed, deleted, interpreted, and corrected the texts.

The biblical books were written in three different languages and in an entirely different culture whose values and understandings are almost completely opposite to ours. And this is what we want to explore! It's like entering Wonderland with Alice: nothing is quite what it seems.

The point of this book, then, is to remind the reader that before the books of the Bible were written down, they were spoken. In other words, behind the print there is a long, long oral tradition that comes through in the written text. This oral tradition is the key to understanding the Bible and, as we shall see, we must really unlearn our modern literary prejudices and adapt the ancient oral mentality if we are to deal with the variety of styles, the errors in content, the contradictions, and the colorful dynamics of the Bible.

This book is presented in three parts. In Part I we clear the air and deal with some preliminaries we absolutely need to look at before we proceed. Here we will examine four themes: revelation, truth wrapped in story, the slow and disastrous tyranny of written print over oral story, and the chasm between the biblical culture and ours. In Part II, we'll move on to our primary concern of unlocking the mysteries of the Bible by using a special key, which is called story. In Part III, we take a brief look at biblical history, both sacred and profane.

I must firmly stress that this storytelling key is only one approach to understanding the Bible. As such, it has its limitations. The reader should look elsewhere for a fuller and deeper understanding of Scripture. Furthermore, I must confess that scriptural exegesis is not my forte; in fact, I am fairly ignorant of it. But I am a parish priest and a storyteller and, after all, when you come right down to it, the Bible is a collection of stories. And when you apply storytelling principles to interpreting Scripture, you'll be surprised what you can learn. As the old saying goes, tell me the stories that fill your life and I'll tell you who you are. The Bible stories tell us who the ancient Hebrews and early Christians are—and by extension, who we are or should be.

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