The Good Book

*Books and friends should be few but good.*
Patrick Henry (1736-99)

*All books are divisible into two classes, the books of the hour, and the books of all time.*
John Ruskin (1819-1900)

Would that I could convey – even in shadow – what a supreme gift the Bible is to humanity.¹ I recall with great emotion my early days of college, as a young man taking Christianity seriously with a group of friends displaying equal fervor. After attending worship at one very special church, her pastor handed me a few booklets as I exited. That brief three minute encounter changed my life. Among the titles was Geoff Thomas’ *Reading the Bible*, an exhortation to do just that – supplemented by an easy-to-use schedule of chapters each day for the year. Helpful. But what captured me more than once was the cover, a copy of a painting of a 16th century man standing before a huge Bible chained to a column of the cathedral in which the Great Book was placed.² The artist had both a glow emanating from the Scriptures and a corresponding sense of awe upon the beaming countenance of the man privileged to be reading God’s Word ... in his own language. Oh my dear readers, amid the many blessings³ you experience in this fleeting life, count the 66 books⁴ which constitute the Good Book high on your list. Does gold comfort in the hour of sickness? Does any prisoner ask for a novel just before his execution? Does the mother who lost her child
derive healing from yesterday’s stock tables? Would you take any of the mags, blogs or paperbacks you’ve read so far this year with you as your companion on that proverbial dessert island? Me neither. Let’s look then – in a fresh way – at this marvel, the Bible.

Those familiar with my work will not be disappointed to find that the material which follows is in seven heads: three component parts of what we call the Old Testament, same number for what is commonly called the New Testament and a final paragraph (or two) about the present form of Scripture found in English translation.

1. *The Law.* The pentagon is that familiarly-shaped building in Virginia. The Pentateuch is that less-well-known technical term for the first five books of the Law, cornerstone of the OT as we know it now and Israel’s unique revelation then. I uphold the traditional view: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy are *The Five Books of Moses* initially penned in Hebrew by the lawgiver.

This set of five were not only written to a primary target audience (Israel) but in a contemporary setting (the ancient Near East). Because of the reality of context, other cultures’ myths bear some similarity to the Genesis creation account. No surprise there. Further, Egypt has prominence not just as a backdrop to the patriarch’s challenging life in that world power (Joseph), but in the titanic struggle to form a new people out of her land – as well as the educational background of our
hero, Moses. Also, the entire structure of the second giving of the Law (Deuteronomy) is now widely recognized as taking the form of a peace treaty repeatedly used during Moses’ era.\(^9\)

2. The Writings. Varied canonical wisdom literature make up the second main division of the OT.\(^10\) I love this body of material – romance (Song of Songs), wisdom (Proverbs), every emotion of human experience (the Psalms), philosophy (Ecclesiastes), existential awfulness amidst a destroyed city (Lamentations), inexplicable suffering (Job) – it’s all there ... riffs on the Law ... reflection upon its right and judicious application ... not to mention response to the ups and downs of life in a fallen world.\(^11\)

Here, too, common grace from and to other cultures is in marked evidence.\(^12\) The Proverbs include two collections of Solomon as its backbone, to be sure, but also insights from men of other cultures who (one presumes) converted into Jewish society.\(^13\) The very structure of 22:17-24:22 sounds echoes from a similar Egyptian reflection.\(^14\) The Song of Solomon – to cite another take on wisdom – makes sense to Africans and Americans and Asians today because of the universality of its love story.

3. The Prophets. Lengthy Isaiah and brief Obadiah share the same purpose: to draw Israel (and Judah) back toward their covenant-keeping LORD.\(^15\) Granted, most prophets tend to be esoteric and emotional: Jeremiah weeps. Hosea has a national object lesson intrude upon his
marriage. You would think Daniel is on drugs. Still, these writers are also characterized by reminders of redemptive history, outreach to other nations (Jonah) and warnings of coming judgment – whether invasion of Israel’s enemies (Habakkuk) or the final Day of the LORD (eight books).

One is reminded of the vast sweep of God’s dealings in the more historical books of the former prophets.¹⁶ Among the latter prophets one senses the LORD calls out specific individuals to idiosyncratic faithfulness, at times along solitary paths. The writer of Hebrews rehearses before a later audience that many prophetic lives were heroic and holy, but far from happy:

> Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated – of whom the world was not worthy – wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.¹⁷

Why? One and all sought individual as well as corporate return to the Lawgiver and LORD. And most people do not take bad news well. It’s easier to dispatch the messenger than repent in response to his message.

So there you have it. Jesus’ Bible, so to speak, was the OT, what Jews recognize as a three-fold description of their Holy Book: the Law, the Writings and the Prophets. This collection in itself is most noteworthy, a font of diverse reflection, guide for Messiah-centric worship, rule for family and nation alike. On and on I could go. But God’s kindness to
humanity did not begin with some obscure Middle Eastern wanders and end with that rag tag nation despised even to this day. No, God in his generosity has given us more: four portraits of Jesus known as Gospels, varied correspondence and a wildly imaginative revelation.

4. *The Gospels.* The four theological, ‘good news’ histories of Jesus of Nazareth are unknown outside the New Testament.\(^{18}\) The Gospels are a unique genre. How brilliant! Matthew, Mark, Luke and John tell the same story, but from such differing perspectives. The first three are called synoptic,\(^{19}\) excluding the fourth, so radically *other* is his approach. John even appropriates the word ‘logos’ used by other world views and redefines it for Christ-centered use. The history / defense of the Acts of the Apostles is a further work by doctor Luke, the Apocalypse an additional stunner by the beloved apostle.

Each man has an angle in his theologizing: Matthew wants to demonstrate Jesus answers all the OT prophecies, fulfills all details of prediction; Mark channels the action-packed voice of Peter and teases his reader to discover a secret: Jesus is the awaited Messiah; Luke is methodical\(^{20}\) and geared to a Gentile audience, offering much more detail here and there; and John – simple, artful John – is fascinated by the number seven: Jesus speaks seven sayings about himself; he performs seven major miracles; and utters seven major discourses. We also get a zoom lens on the last week of our Lord’s life, exclusive time with his disciples - that all would come to life through belief.\(^{21}\) Good stuff.
5. *The Correspondence.* On the one hand, Jude, James, John, Peter and Paul\(^\text{22}\) - men of their time - use the letter-writing conventions of their day.\(^\text{23}\) On the other, God sees fit to establish not just his early church, but all churches through the ages (!) with the occasional letters prompted by this and that in the individuals (Timothy, Titus, Philemon, 3 John) or congregations to which each was addressed. In other words, our Father saw fit to expand our understanding of Jesus through notes written for specific moments – a mosaic – rather than by way of a flat, repetitive, dry, abstracted systematic theology.\(^\text{24}\)

As with the Gospels, the letter writers’ several approaches are nothing to fear. Paul’s theology does not contradict James’ ... which goes against Peter’s ... which is supposedly askew from Christ’s, ... brother John gainsaying all the above in his own idiosyncratic way. Hardly! A mature student of Scripture discerns harmony amidst various authors and much dependency upon various OT books, themes and so on. Don’t let some sloppily dressed agnostic professor from community college tell you otherwise!

6. *The Apocalypse.* The drug-induced psychedelic sights and anarchic activity of the 1960s has nothing on the book of Revelation. St. John is at work again, rehearsing the vision he experienced some fine Sunday ... in patterns of seven once more. Recent scholarship has shown how profoundly saturated he is in OT imagery. This work is the end of Genesis’ beginning, a reminder to the home team all will be well,
in spite of present persecution. That’s right; the original writer is – once more – addressing an original audience. The book is not an outline of world history ... is not some numbers-based puzzle to figure out with the day’s paper and latest conspiracy theory ... is not blueprint for an exact future this generation of believers is to follow. No, no. It is here many have erred. John wants seven named congregations to take heed to circumstances current to them. As major inducement to hang in there come these latter-day reminders – in all its fantastic phantasmagorical imagery – of a mighty God’s eventual triumph over all foes.

So what do we have in the Good Book? A collection written over millennia by numerous human hands, behind which is the superintendence of God telling many stories amidst one great story. Of origins ... of heroic individuals wrestling with the Divine ... of a people all but beat to a pulp in that superpower we know only distantly as ancient Egypt ... of a bunch of whiney sinners formed into a nation ... of a line pointing to Christ in the future ... of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection ... and of the inauguration of his kingdom which will know no end.

7. The English Bible. And it all comes to us such that any well-educated reader has more scholarship in her study Bible in 2013 than the most informed 1% had even half a century ago. And, like Coca Cola, both affordable and available. Remarkable. Translated from the original’s Hebrew scrolls and various Greek media, through the Latin,
to the commonplace languages of peoples around the world, God has blessed each generation ‘on this terrestrial ball’ with the Scriptures.\textsuperscript{30} I have stood in Wartburg Castle where Luther – heretic become both spiritual and linguistic father of Germany – translated \textit{Die Bibel}. I was in the very room where he – lone fugitive – labored to make eternal verities intelligible for village butcher … soldier … protector … peasant.

I like Tom Wolfe’s novels.\textsuperscript{31} They are not brief, but each captures – head on – an aspect of our culture many are afraid to face. Here’s a fact I find interesting: copies of his last three works are somewhat commonplace in the Goodwill / consignment shop circuit. But I have yet to pick up one which bears the marks of \textit{actually having been read}. A novel on the shelf is chic and even potentially insightful; but the same gone through cover to cover is even better. My dear reader, you have been patient to consider my tract. May I ask: Are you patient to tackle one of the obscure parts of the Kings or Chronicles? You are subscribing to my work-in-progress. Are you allowing the wisdom literature to make you an ethical work-in-progress? You lament the decline of our culture. Do you take in God’s holy Law from his Holy Word? Oh friend, read / study / memorize / teach / affirm / apply / embody the Good Book.
This piece is the fifth of 52 chapters in *Thirteen Bold Resolutions for 2013*, a virtual book I am writing weekly throughout the year. It is distributed weekends on a subscription basis: $24 per annum. Use is limited to one e-mail per household, on the honor system. The writer permits up to three sample essays to be sent for consideration by potential subscribers known to a sender.

Thank you for expanded exposure, as well as an increased readership by personal endorsement.

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1 Or *humankind*, if you insist - My word choice is intentional: Adam (man) was created first.
2 The Geneva Bible was completed in 1560. The high cost of printing would make a text of its type rare and very valuable, as well as seldom found in the possession of any but the wealthiest of individuals.
3 Ps 28:9 and 29:11
4 In the Protestant canon - Roman Catholic practice recognizes 15 more books called the Apocrypha.
6 Though dated, it nevertheless remains a standard right-of-center guide to the territory.
7 Obviously upon his decease, editorial notes were added here and there by others.
11 “Ignorance of the fact that man has a wounded nature inclined to evil gives rise to serious errors in the areas of education, politics, social action, and morals.” See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2nd ed. (Citta del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), P 407.
12 1 Kings 4:29-31
13 Prov. 30:1-33 and 31:1-9 at a minimum, if not also 22:17-24:22 and 24:23-34
16 That is, Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings, which are overlooked for brevity’s sake.
17 Heb. 11:35b-38
19 See Guthrie, 136-208 for a lengthy discussion of ‘similarities’ and ‘differences’.
20 Luke 1:1-4
21 John 20:30-31
22 As well as the author of Hebrews, whom I conclude was Apollos. See Guthrie, 668-82.
24 Though Ephesians, Romans and Hebrews do display tight, outlined thinking of a systematic nature
26 The refrain *To the one who conquers* (ESV) is repeated in the message to each of the seven churches.
27 2 Pet. 1:21
28 This in itself is huge, a mark of Christianity’s universality. In contrast, the parochialism of Islam is seen in its insistence the Koran can only be rightly understood by an ethnic Arab reading the text in Arabic.
31 His latest (last?) is *Back to Blood* (New York: Little Brown, 2012); he was advanced a mere $7M.