

Understanding the Bible

A GUIDE TO READING THE SCRIPTURES

Saint Mary's Press®

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Contributors

Reviewers and Coordinating Editors

Margaret Nutting Ralph, PhD
(Introductions to the Old Testament)
Director of the Master of Arts Program
for Roman Catholics
Lexington Theological Seminary
Lexington, Kentucky

Catherine Cory, PhD
(Introductions to the New Testament)
Associate Professor of Theology
University of Saint Thomas
Saint Paul, Minnesota

Authors of Articles on Reading and Studying the Bible

Martin Albl, PhD
Mary C. Boys, SNJM, PhD

Margaret Nutting Ralph, PhD
Shannon Schrein, OSF, PhD

Authors of Introductions to the Old and New Testament

James E. Brenneman, PhD
(Introduction to the Pentateuch)
President of Goshen College
Goshen, Indiana

Lisa W. Davison, PhD
(Introduction to the Prophets)
Professor of Old Testament
Lexington Theological Seminary
Lexington, Kentucky

David A. Bosworth, PhD
(Introduction to the Historical Books)
Professor of Old Testament Studies
Barry University
Miami Shores, Florida

Christopher McMahon, PhD
(Introduction to the Gospels and Acts)
Assistant Professor of Theology
University of Mary
Bismarck, North Dakota

Shannon Schrein, OSF, PhD
(Introduction to the Wisdom and Poetry
Books)
Professor and Chair of Religious Studies
Lourdes College
Sylvania, Ohio

Catherine Cory, PhD
(Introduction to the Letters and Revelation)
Associate Professor of Theology
University of Saint Thomas
Saint Paul, Minnesota

Charts

Sheila O'Connell-Roussell, DMin
Instructor of Biblical and Pastoral Theology
Marylhurst University
Lake Oswego, Oregon

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Introduction

The Bible.

What comes to mind when you hear that phrase? The inspired word of God? A history of the Jewish and Christian faiths? A guide for living? A great work of literature? A dusty old book that has little relevance for the world today?

A host of other questions may surface as well. Are all Bibles the same? What's the difference between the Old and New Testaments? When was the Bible written? Who wrote it, and why? How are we to understand the Bible today?

Those are tough questions, questions that can't be answered by a handful of articles, some charts and maps, a timeline, and a glossary. The best way to begin to understand and appreciate the Bible, not surprisingly, is to read it. But to read it well, with understanding, those articles, charts, and maps, and that timeline and glossary can be extremely helpful, and so we have provided them here.

We realize that students come at the Bible from a variety of perspectives, including some with no religious or faith tradition at all. You may be reading the Bible as part of a Scripture study, or as literature, or for other academic or religious reasons. Also, many different translations of the Bible are available; we don't know which version you have. Regardless of your background, your beliefs, your questions, or the Bible translation you are reading, this guide has been created to help inform your reading and enrich your understanding of the Bible from historical, literary, and faith perspectives.

Inside are articles that explore the Bible in its faith, historical, and cultural contexts. The Bible is explored as literature too—its genres and literary forms. There are articles introducing the Old and New Testaments. The history and differences of translations are discussed, and other tools to help you unlock the Bible are introduced. Other aids are provided as well, notably maps, charts, a timeline, and a glossary. Together these further explore the Bible and the world in which it was written, as well as the progression of scholarship that helps us understand the Bible today.

We highly recommend that you treat the Bible as your primary source and use this guide to help you unlock and understand the Scriptures.

Jerry Ruff, Editorial Director
College Division
Saint Mary's Press

Reading and Studying the Bible

What Is the Bible?

Regardless of their faith background or religious beliefs, many people at some time ask themselves: “What is a Bible?” “How did the Bible come into existence?” “Why does the Bible have such authority in some people’s lives?” “How does a person correctly understand what the Bible has to say?” For Christians, these questions carry added importance, as the answers to them say something about how God has revealed God’s self over the centuries, as well as about God’s self-revelation today. In one well-known biblical psalm, the narrator offers a prayer to God the lawmaker: “Your word is a lamp for my feet, / a light for my path” (Ps 119:105). Christians today continue to look to the Bible as that word, that lamp.

The Bible is not one book but a library of books. Whereas a book is usually all one kind of writing, a library includes a variety: myth, legend, history, biography, and fiction, to name but a few. And where a book is usually by one author who lived at one time in history and had a particu-

lar point of view, a library comprises a number of authors who lived at various times in history and had many points of view.

“But wait,” many Christians might object. “The Bible does have only one author and that author is God.” It is true that Christians claim that God is the author of the Bible. We will discuss just what that means later when we explore the Catholic Christian understanding of the Bible as a means of handing on revelation and when we say that the authors are inspired. Nevertheless, Christians regard human beings as God’s instruments in writing the Bible. These human beings lived in different centuries and had a variety of points of view.

It is extremely important to understand that the Bible is a library of books written in different literary forms, at various times in history, from a variety of points of view, because this information affects how we understand what the Bible teaches. You will find in-depth discussion of each of those topics in other articles

in this guide (“Understanding Genres and Literary Forms,” “Understanding the Bible in Its Historical and Cultural Contexts,” and “Understanding the Bible within the Living Tradition of the Catholic Church”). Here we will address another question: “How did the Bible reach its present form?”

A Five-step Process

The Bible is in finished form; that is, the library of books considered canonical is complete. But how was this particular arrangement of books decided? The Bible as we know it is the end result of what might be described as a five-step process.

Events

Though Christian faiths differ in how they read and understand the Bible, the sequence leading to the selection of particular writings to comprise the biblical canon is a five-step process. The first step is what Catholic Christians believe is God’s self-revelation through events. These events occurred over a two-thousand-year period, starting with the ancestors in faith of the Jewish and Christian traditions, Abraham and Sarah, who lived around 1850 BCE, and concluding with the end of the apostolic age, that is, around the end of the first century CE. Many of the events may be familiar: Abraham responding to God’s call to leave the home of his ancestors and go to a new land; Moses leading God’s people out of slavery in Egypt; David uniting the twelve Tribes and establishing a united kingdom; the division of the kingdom; the rise of the Assyrians, who conquered the northern kingdom; the rise of the Babylonians, who conquered the southern kingdom and sent the people into Exile; the rise of the Persians, who

conquered the Babylonians and allowed the Israelites to return to their holy land; the rise of the Greeks and then the Romans, who ruled the holy land as part of the Roman Empire. All these events form the skeleton of the Old Testament.

It was during the time of the Roman occupation that Jesus, whom Christians believe is both human and divine, was born. The events that underlie the Gospels are: Jesus had a public ministry that was powerful in both word and deed; Jesus was found guilty of blasphemy in a Jewish court, and accused of sedition in a Roman court; Jesus received the death penalty; Jesus was crucified, died, and was buried; Jesus rose from the dead and is still in the midst of his people. The events that underlie the rest of what we call the New Testament involve the birth of the Church and the spreading of the Good News of Jesus Christ to the surrounding countries.

Oral Tradition

The second step in the process is oral tradition. People talked about the events that they experienced. Through the generations the stories of God’s powerful intervention in the lives of God’s people were told over and over. For example, in the Book of Genesis, the first book of the Bible, we read the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. As that book ends, the Israelites have gone to Egypt because there was a drought in the holy land and they needed to find food. The second book in the Bible is the Book of Exodus, in which we read the story of Moses leading the people out of slavery in Egypt. Between the last page of Genesis and the first page of Exodus, five hundred years have elapsed. The Israelites who were

slaves in Egypt knew about God's promises to their ancestors not because they had a modern Bible, but because the stories of the ancestors and God's promises to the ancestors were passed on through oral tradition.

Not just stories about the events of the Old Testament were passed on through oral tradition; stories about Jesus were also passed on through oral tradition before they were written. This means that no biblical account, whether in the Old Testament or in the New Testament, is contemporary with the events that it describes. All the stories are told in hindsight. In addition, none of the stories were passed on for the purpose of teaching history. Rather, the stories are stories of faith; their purpose is to describe how God has revealed God's self through events.

The stories that developed to pass on the people's understanding of God's powerful presence in the events of their lives could be in any literary form. After all, the stories were composed not to teach history but to inspire each succeeding generation, to teach that generation that the promises made to Abraham are promises made to them, and that because they are in a covenant relationship with God, they have certain obligations and responsibilities. Such lessons could be taught in any number of forms, including legends, songs, fiction, allegories, parables, and riddles. Any literary form could be a vehicle to teach truth.

Written Tradition

Slowly, over time, some of the stories passed on through oral tradition began to be written down. If we had lived during the time of Abraham

(1850 BCE) or Moses (1250 BCE), we would not have been able to read any part of our present-day Bible. However, if we had lived during the time of King David (1000 BCE), we could have read some of what became today's Old Testament. At that time stories that had developed orally over hundreds of years were gradually written down and collected into an organized narrative.

This same process underlies the New Testament. Had we been contemporaries of Jesus, we could not have read what would become today's New Testament. Had we lived during Paul's lifetime, we could not have read the present-day Gospels, although we could have read Paul's letters, the earliest New Testament material to reach written form. Gospel materials, too, were passed on orally, and then in written form, before they became the organized narratives that we have today.

Edited Tradition

Had we lived at the time of King David and read the organized narrative that dates to about 1000 BCE, we would still not be reading the Book of Genesis or the Book of Exodus as those books now exist. Over time, in the light of subsequent events, the stories were retold to include new insights or emphasize certain points that were learned through the subsequent events. For instance, in the earliest collected narrative that dates to the time of King David, the stories of the ancestors were told from the point of view of those who lived in the south. When the kingdom split into north and south, the stories were retold from the point of view of those in the northern kingdom. After the northern kingdom was conquered

by the Assyrians, those in the south pondered what the northern kingdom had done wrong. The stories were retold, emphasizing the lessons stressed by the reformers who were calling the people to fidelity to their covenant relationship with God. After the Babylonian Exile, the stories were again retold in the light of what had been learned from that experience. The Old Testament stories as they exist today are layered. They reflect the thinking and insights of the Israelites over the span of their history, not just the insights that are contemporary with the original storytellers.

The New Testament is also an edited text. The author of the Gospel According to Luke describes himself as an editor who is arranging the inherited oral and written traditions about events in order to meet the needs of his particular audience (Lk 1:1–4). Also, the order of the books in the New Testament is not the order in which the books were written. In the modern edited arrangement, the Gospels come first, and the letters, many of which were written earlier than the Gospels, follow.

Canonical

Not every book that developed through the process we have described is in the Bible. We call those books that are in the Bible, canonical. The word canon originally referred to a reed that was used to measure things, a ruler. The fact that a book is in the canon means that the believing community claims that this book is inspired by God and therefore faithfully teaches those truths that God wishes to teach for the sake of salvation. The book is a rule for faith.

The selection of canonical books also developed slowly over time.

The Old Testament canon, as it exists today, is divided into three sections by Jewish scholars: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. We see evidence of these divisions in the foreword to the Book of Sirach, which dates to the end of the second century BCE: “Many important truths have been handed down to us though the law, the prophets, and the later authors.” However, the Hebrew canon of the Jews, which Christians call the Old Testament, probably did not reach its present form until the first century CE.

The Catholic Old Testament canon includes some books not included in the Jewish Hebrew canon or in the Protestant canon. These books—Tobit, Judith, First and Second Maccabees, Wisdom, Sirach, and Baruch—are called deuterocanonical books by Catholics and apocryphal books (that is, not part of the canon) by Protestants. All the disputed books were written during the last few hundred years before Christ, many of them in Greek. They became part of the Septuagint, that is, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. The Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek in the third century BCE because many Jews lived in Egypt and spoke Greek rather than Hebrew. The deuterocanonical books appear in the Catholic canon because Catholic biblical translations rested on both the Hebrew and Greek Old Testament texts. They do not appear in Protestant canons because Protestant translations rested only on the Hebrew Old Testament texts.

Catholics and Protestants have exactly the same New Testament canon. Again, not all the books about New Testament events are in the canon. There are deuterocanonical or

apocryphal gospels as well. However, by the end of the second century CE, the four Gospels that we now have were in general use, and the others had fallen out of use. By the end of the fourth century, the whole New Testament canon as we now have it had taken shape.

Christians believe that the formation of the canon was due to the work of the Holy Spirit in the worshipping community. Those books that the community recognized as faithfully passing on the beliefs of the community and nourishing the community remained in use; those that did not fell out of use.

The Catholic canon was officially closed in the sixteenth century at the Council of Trent. During the Protestant Reformation, debate arose about whether or not all the books that were then in use should be considered canonical. In reaction to this discussion, the Council affirmed that the New Testament books that had been in use for fifteen hundred years and that had formed the self-understanding of the Catholic Church were canonical. The Church would not add to them nor subtract from them.

Inspiration

Catholics affirm that God is the author of the Bible. However, Catholics do not claim that God actually wrote the Bible. The Catholic understanding is that the Bible is the end result of a process that included events, oral tradition, written tradition, editing, and acceptance by the Spirit-filled community.

Catholic belief, then, is that God is the author of the Bible in that God inspired God's people at every step of the process. Those who originally experienced the events, and recog-

nized them as events in which God was powerful and present, were inspired. Those who passed on the stories through oral tradition, those who originally wrote them down, those who edited them, and the community that recognized certain texts as texts that accurately passed on the faith of the community were all inspired. God's inspiration was present in every generation. At the same time, the human authors of the Bible are real authors. They wrote in their own language, using their own literary expressions, and from their own historical perspectives to record the revealed word of God. Thus, the Bible is the word of God in the words of its human authors.

Revelation

What does the Church mean when it claims that the Bible is revelation? Does it mean that inspired authors had God's point of view so that every word they spoke on every subject is true (that is, literally God's word or the words that came directly from God's mouth)? No, the Church does not make such a claim, even though it affirms that the Bible is inerrant, that is, without error. When it claims that the Bible contains revelation and is inerrant, it is claiming that the Bible teaches the truth on the subjects that it is addressing: the inspired authors teach the truth about who God is, who humanity is in relation to God and the rest of creation, and what God would have people do to cooperate with the coming of God's Kingdom.

The Bible was written, then, not to teach history or science, but rather to teach about the nature of God, about how God has revealed God's self through the centuries, and about how people might live in a way that

is pleasing to God. The Bible was written to teach what is necessary regarding salvation.

The Authority of the Scriptures

The Second Vatican Council's document *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* (*Dei Verbum*) says, "the Christian religion itself, all the preaching of the Church must be nourished and regulated by Sacred Scripture" (no. 21). Because Christians believe that the Scriptures are God's self-revelation and that they teach the truth regarding salvation, they also believe that there is no higher authority on earth than the Scriptures. The Catholic Church teaches that the teaching Church, the Scriptures, and Tradition have a relationship in which each is essential to the other. It is the Church's role to interpret the Scriptures, but in doing so the "teaching office [Magisterium] is not above the word of God, but serves it" (*Dei Verbum*, no. 10).

This means that the Church cannot teach something that contradicts the Scriptures. However, the Church can teach a truth that has its roots, but not its full flowering, in the Scriptures, as well as something on which the Scriptures remain silent.

A Contextualist Approach to the Scriptures

Because the Catholic Church sees its role as interpreting the Scriptures, it also teaches how to understand the truth that the Bible contains. In a single word, the Church teaches its people to be contextualists, rather than fundamentalists, in interpreting the Bible. This means that in order to understand correctly the revelation that

the Bible is teaching, the reader must interpret biblical passages in the context in which they appear in the Bible. There are three contexts to consider.

Because the Bible is a library of books, the reader must consider the kind of writing, that is, the literary form, in which a particular passage appears. To ignore the literary form may cause the reader to misunderstand not only what an author is teaching on a topic but the very topic that the author is addressing.

Because the authors lived at various times in history, the reader must consider the context of each author's historical time and the presumptions that the author and the audience shared. If an author pictures God creating a flat world, the author is not teaching about the shape of the earth, but merely presuming that the earth is flat in the course of teaching that God created all that exists.

Because the Bible took form over a two-thousand-year period, the reader must consider the context of the process of revelation that occurred over time. Early insights often represent one step in understanding a mystery, not the fullness of revelation. If the reader takes a partial truth and presents it as the whole truth, he or she has once more put the authority of the Scriptures behind his or her own misunderstanding, not behind what the Bible actually teaches.

A Living Word

To be a biblical contextualist does not contradict an understanding of the Scriptures as a living word that can speak directly to the human heart in any context, any human experience. However, biblical contextualists are aware that scriptural passages taken out of context can be used to sup-

port conclusions that directly contradict the revelation that the Scriptures teach. Therefore, when a biblical contextualist hears the Scriptures as a living word, that person asks, "Is the conclusion I am drawing from this passage compatible with what the Scriptures teach as a whole?" In this way, the Christian believer feels assured of using the Scriptures to hear God's voice and not to self delude. Integrating the Scriptures into one's prayer life in this way, the Christian believes, allows the living word to

help one discern God's self-revelation in one's own life, so that the Scriptures truly will be a lamp for one's feet, a light upon one's path.

Margaret Nutting Ralph, PhD
Director of the
Master of Arts Program
for Roman Catholics
Lexington Theological Seminary
Lexington, Kentucky