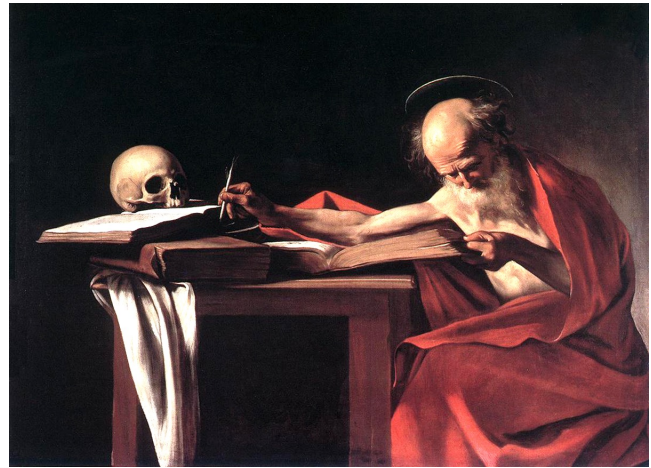


THE BIBLE



What is the Bible?

The *Bible* is God's revelation insofar as it has been written down. The *Bible*, or *Sacred Scripture*, is a collection of 73 books (originally individual scrolls) which were written by many different human authors during a span of over 1000 years, and which the Church considers authoritative, inspired by God, and formative for Christian belief and life. This official collection of books, recognized by the Church and read in her official worship (*liturgy*), is what we call the *Canon of Scripture*.

What are the main parts, or divisions, of Scripture?

The two main divisions in Sacred Scripture are the *Old Testament* (everything before Christ and leading up to Him) and the *New Testament* (the books that flow out of the experience of Christ's first coming). The Old Testament contains 46 books, the New Testament 27 books.

What are the books of the Old Testament?

The books which the Catholic Church recognizes as part of the Old Testament are: *Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 2 Kings, 1 Chronicles, 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Tobit, Judith, Esther, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Wisdom, Sirach, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Baruch, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, 1 Maccabees, 2 Maccabees.*

What are the different parts of the Old Testament?

There are different ways to divide the Old Testament. Perhaps the easiest way to divide the Old Testament is into historical, prophetic, and wisdom books. Among the historical books, the first five books are of special significance and are called the *Torah* or *Pentateuch*.

The *historical books*, which present the narrative of God's people through a theological lens are:

- *Genesis* (Adam & Eve, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob/Israel, Joseph)
- *Exodus* (slavery in Egypt, deliverance, flight into the wilderness, Mount Sinai)
- *Leviticus* (worship and laws are legislated and implemented at Mount Sinai)
- *Numbers* (the journey from Mount Sinai to the Promised Land)

- *Deuteronomy* (Moses exhorts the people of Israel before they enter the Promised Land)
- *Joshua* (Israel enters and settles in the Promised Land)
- *Judges* (wavering between fidelity and falling away under various judges)
- *Ruth* (a story about a female convert and David's great grandmother)
- *1 Samuel & 1 Chronicles* (Samuel, Saul, David)
- *2 Samuel & 1 Chronicles* (David's reign in Jerusalem over all Israel)
- *1 Kings & 2 Chronicles* (King Solomon to King Ahab, Elijah the prophet)
- *2 Kings & 2 Chronicles* (Elisha the prophet, King Ahaziah to the Babylonian Exile)
- *Ezra & Nehemiah* (Return from exile, rebuilding of the nation and temple)
- *1 & 2 Maccabees* (reclaiming Israel from foreign threats, fidelity to God, martyrs)

The *prophetic books* which record God's messages to His people during times of political and religious turmoil or restoration are:

- *Isaiah*
- *Jeremiah, Lamentations, Baruch*
- *Ezekiel*
- *Daniel*
- Twelve Minor Prophets (*Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*)

The *wisdom books* are:

- *Job* (suffering & loss, questioning, innocence asserted & debated, God's intervention, restoration)
- *Psalms* (150 prayers)
- *Proverbs* (sayings and reflections)
- *Ecclesiastes* (a philosopher king questions the purpose of life)
- *Song of Songs* (love song between a king and queen)
- *Wisdom* (reflections on God, Israel, and the idolatry of the nations)
- *Sirach* (collections of the sayings of Jesus Ben Sira)

How can we understand the whole Old Testament in a simple way?

Jesus recognizes the kind of threefold division of the Old Testament outlined above when he mentions "the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms" (Lk 24:44). However, most of the time Jesus and the New Testament writers summarize the Old Testament in terms of "the law and the prophets" (Mt 5:17; 7:12; 11:13; Lk 16:16; Jn 1:45; Acts 13:15; 24:14; 28:23; Rom 3:21). In a similar way, the whole Old Testament can be divided into two parts revolving around two mountains, Mount Sinai and Mount Zion. Mount Sinai is where the people of Israel encounter God, receive His "law" (*torah*), enter into a covenant with Him, and receive from Him a way to worship Him. The second part of the Old Testament revolves around Mount Zion in

Jerusalem, where God's Temple is established, where David and his descendants rule God's people as kings, and which is the central place of concern for the prophets.

The Old Testament can also be seen in terms of building covenants, which are agreements involving a relationship and mutual commitment between God and His people. Thus, the following covenants are progressively established:

- Covenant with Adam and Eve ("One Holy Couple")
- Covenant with Noah and his sons and their wives ("One Holy Family")
- Covenant with Abraham and his kinsmen ("One Holy Tribe")
- Covenant with Moses and the people of Israel ("One Holy Nation")
- Covenant with David and Israel, and certain nations aligned with Israel ("One Holy Kingdom")

Despite sins and failures along the way, all this would lead up to the "new" (Jer 31:31; Lk 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6; Heb 8:8, 13; 9:15; 12:24) and "eternal" (Heb 9:15; 13:20) covenant which Jesus would establish, and which would embrace all peoples through the universal church He would establish ("One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church").

What are the books of the New Testament?

The New Testament books, which were written at different times between 50 and 100 AD, are: *Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, Jude, Revelation.*

What are the different parts of the New Testament?

The New Testament can be divided into the following parts:

- The Gospels, or accounts of Jesus' Life (*Matthew, Mark, Luke, John*)
- An Account of the Early Church from the Ascension of Jesus until Paul arrives in Rome (*Acts of the Apostles*)
- Letters from various Christian leaders to different Christian communities or individuals
 - Paul's Letters (*Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*)
 - *The Letter to the Hebrews*
 - The "Catholic" Epistles (*James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, Jude*)
- The Apocalypse (*Revelation*)

One can also group the New Testament books into the different authors associated with the different books. Besides individual books authored by, or associated with, various early apostles or disciples, there are four authors thought to be the source of more than one book:

- Luke (*Luke & Acts*)
- John (*John, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, Revelation*)
- Paul (see above for the list of “Pauline” books)
- Peter (*1 Peter, 2 Peter*)

Why are there four different Gospels?

The Gospels are accounts of the life, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus written by different authors from different perspectives and to different communities. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the *Synoptic Gospels*, since they are similar (“synoptic” means to “see together”). Whereas the Gospel of John is different in many ways. With all four Gospels, we have a much richer perspective of Jesus than if we were limited to only one Gospel. Each Gospel is very powerful in its own right and gives us unique insights into Jesus.

How can the different letters of St. Paul be grouped?

In our New Testament, we have a collection of letters that St. Paul wrote to various communities and individuals during his missionary journeys in the Mediterranean world. Four letters are to individuals (*1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*). Three of these are instructions to co-workers of Paul and leaders of Christian communities (Timothy and Titus), and so are called the “pastoral epistles.” The other (*Philemon*) is a letter of appeal to a slave owner to free his slave. The rest of Paul’s letters are to communities. *Romans* is a unique letter which Paul wrote to a church (in Rome) he was traveling to and had not founded or visited. Paul’s other letters are to churches he founded or had a formative influence on. Some of these churches were in Asia Minor, or modern day Turkey (*Galatia, Ephesus, Colossae*). Some were in Greece (*Corinth, Thessalonica, Philippi*). Some of Paul’s letters are called the “captivity epistles,” since Paul wrote them from prison (*Philippians, Colossians, Ephesians, Philemon, 2 Timothy*). We can also understand St. Paul’s letters in terms of the possible order in which they were written, namely *1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Romans, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians, Titus, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy*.

Why is the Catholic Bible different from the Protestant Bible?

The New Testament is the same for all Christian communities. However, there is disagreement about the books of the Old Testament. The Catholic Church has seven more books in its Old Testament canon than the Protestant communities have, as well as some parts in Daniel and Esther. The Catholic canon is essentially the same as was recognized in the early Church councils of Hippo and Carthage (393-414AD), and later most solemnly recognized and defined at the Council of Trent in the 1500’s. The Protestant reformer, Martin Luther, challenged the officially accepted list of Old and New Testament books in the 1500’s for three reasons. First, certain biblical books contained doctrines which Martin Luther rejected. Second, original Hebrew texts (or, rather, copies of original texts) were not at the time available for these seven books. Third, Martin Luther thought that the Christian Old Testament should be identical to

the canon of Hebrew Scriptures which the Jews had currently recognized and used. The problem with Luther's reasons are that, first, it is not legitimate to reject books of the Bible when they do not accord with one's personal theology. Second, the canonical requirement that an Old Testament book be written in Hebrew is arbitrary. In addition, in the twentieth century, ancient Hebrew texts were discovered for some parts of these seven books. Third, Jewish tradition was not in full agreement about the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures until after the first century, and the canon agreed upon presently in Jewish communities was officially recognized by Jews who did not accept Jesus as the Messiah. After the coming of Jesus, however, it is the Church that now has the authority to determine what belongs to Sacred Scripture, not any community which would not recognize Jesus. Lastly, while none of these seven books are explicitly quoted in the New Testament, there are several instances of passages implicitly referred to. There are many books in the Protestant Old Testament which are not quoted in the New Testament either. Such is not a basis from excluding them from the Old Testament.

Are there "missing books" of the Bible, or can the Bible be added to?

There were many circulated writings in the early Church which the Church was aware of but ultimately chose not to include in the canon of the Bible, either because a particular writing had problematic aspects to it (like the so-called "Gospels" of "Thomas"), or because the writing was felt to be too late or not connected closely enough with an early apostle or disciple of Jesus. So, the Church was very deliberate about which books were included or excluded from Scripture. Also, God's revelation comes to a fullness with the coming of Christ. Therefore, the Church has decided that divine revelation is considered "closed" after the last books of the New Testament were written, or with the death of the last apostle. From that point, all that God has revealed is complete and will be handed on to each generation. We can always understand God's revelation in deeper ways. But God will not officially or publicly reveal anything new about Himself or His plan for us until the end of time. Thus, there are no "missing books of the Bible," and the Bible cannot be added to.

Who wrote the books of the Bible?

At the deepest level, God is the author of the Bible. We therefore speak of the Bible as *inspired*. This does not mean that the books of the Bible were *dictated by God*, or that the human authors of Scripture were purely passive in the exercise of writing each book. Rather, God employed the human authors in their full humanness and with their strengths and limitations in knowledge and literary skill. Regarding the human authors of Scripture, most books of the Bible do not tell us who wrote them, and some books were written "in the name" of a certain author, but were understood not to be literally from that author, for example, the Book of Ecclesiastes, which we know was not written by Solomon. Many books have traditional authors associated with them. The Church allows reasonable scholarly debate about the possible authors of the biblical books, while respecting tradition. In the end, who the human authors actually were does not affect the *inspiration* of the Bible.

How should we read and interpret the Bible?

We see the Scriptures as the word of God. Therefore, we should reverence the Bible and look to the Scriptures for spiritual inspiration. It is important to understand and interpret the Bible correctly, however. It is important always to let the Church guide our understanding and interpretation of the Bible. The following approaches to Scripture should be avoided:

- The tendency to treat the Bible as a mere collection of human documents (secular approach)
- The tendency to insist upon taking all texts at face-value scientifically and historically, and the preoccupation in trying to harmonize all detailed discrepancies (fundamentalist approach)
- The tendency to take passages out of context and to use them for some agenda
- The tendency to make oneself the ultimate arbitrator of the meaning of the Bible, or to pit passages of Scripture against the Church

In contrast, we should read the Bible in light of Christ, Who is the one Word spoken in the many words of Scripture. We should read it with faith and reason, as well as with the guidance of the Church. We should read the Bible in continuity with the tradition of the Church, which includes many insights from the liturgy, teachings, and the Fathers of the Church. We should consider the text and context very carefully, and view each passage in terms of the whole of Scripture. To this end, studying our faith and the books of the Bible in light of our faith is invaluable. We should also read the Scriptures prayerfully, looking for what God is saying to us through the Scriptures. With some difficult passages, especially in the Old Testament, it can be helpful to remember that God progressively revealed Himself, and that God used and even allowed human limitations and imperfect understandings of God to come through at times. In the end, God has willed to use the Scriptures as a privileged instrument to speak to us, to inspire us, to enlighten us, to form us, to make us holy, and to lead us to eternal life. That should be the focus in our prayerful reading of the Bible.

How is the Bible used at Mass?

For Sundays, there are always three readings at Mass, the *First Reading*, the *Second Reading*, and the *Gospel*. There is also a psalm recited or sung between the first and second reading. The *First Reading* is usually from the Old Testament and is usually paired with the Gospel, although sometimes it is from the Acts of the Apostles. The *Second Reading* is always from a New Testament letter. The *Gospel* is always from Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John.

For Sundays, there is a three-year cycle of readings, called Years A, B, and C. Year A is devoted to Matthew, Year B to Mark, and Year C to Luke. The Gospel of John is often read during the Lent and Easter seasons, and at other special times of the year.

For daily Mass during the week, there is a two-year cycle for the First Reading, called Years 1 and 2, while the Gospel is the same for both years. With regard to the Old Testament, Year 1 is mainly devoted to the first part of the Old Testament, to the “Law,” whereas Year 2 is mainly devoted to the second part of the Old Testament, to the “Prophets.” New Testament readings are also interspersed within these two years.

How do we highlight the Gospel at Mass?

The Gospels are at the heart of the Bible since they constitute the only four accounts of the life of Jesus we accept as canonical. For this reason, there are certain things we do for the Gospel at Mass that we don't do for any other readings:

- We stand, whereas we sit for the other readings.
- There is a procession, which can involve incense and candles.
- Only an ordained priest or deacon can read the Gospel at Mass and give the homily. If a deacon is present, it is his proper role to read the Gospel.
- If a deacon is present, he receives a blessing from the priest before processing to read the Gospel. If no deacon is present, the priest prays a special prayer in quiet while bowing to the altar before reading the Gospel.
- The *Alleluia* ("Praise the LORD" in Hebrew) is sung, with a Scriptural verse in between the *Alleluia* refrain.
- The deacon or priest says, "The Lord be with you" before reading the Gospel. He then traces the cross on the text of the Gospel with his thumb.
- After the priest or deacons says "A reading from the holy Gospel according to (*Mathew, Mark, Luke, or John*)," the people respond, "Glory to you, O Lord," while tracing the cross on their forehead, lips, and heart. Sometimes the Gospel is incensed at this point.
- There is a special *Book of the Gospels* that can be used which contains all the Gospel passages read at Mass for the three-year Sunday cycle and special feast days.
- The Gospel is kissed afterward, while the priest quietly says, "Through the words of the Gospel may our sins be wiped away."
- At the end of the Gospel reading, we respond, "Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ," whereas we only say, "Thanks be to God" after the other readings.

How should I go about reading the Bible on my own?

It is a good spiritual practice to read a little of the Bible every day. It is generally advisable to start with the New Testament, especially with the Gospels, and slowly to make your way through the whole New and Old Testaments. It is also advisable to obtain good commentaries or guides to help you understand and rightly interpret the Scriptures.

There is a traditional method of prayerfully reading the Bible called *Lectio Divina* (“divine reading”). This method, either alone or in a group, involves reading a select passage slowly and prayerfully, taking some time to meditate on it, reflecting on how God is speaking to you through the passage, speaking to God from your heart in light of the passage, and ending with quiet prayer in the presence of God, allowing the passage to sit with you and to form you. (See the separate handout with more details about the method of *Lectio Divina*.)

SCRIPTURAL READINGS

“For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.” —Romans 15:4

“Attend to the public reading of scripture.” —1 Timothy 4:13

“From childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” —2 Timothy 3:15-16

“First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.” —2 Peter 1:20-21

“The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.” —John 6:63

“Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart.” —Jeremiah 15:16

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. *What are some new things you learned about the Bible here?*
2. *How should we as Catholics read and interpret the Bible?*
3. *How might you find greater inspiration from the Bible, both at Mass and in your daily life?*

READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK

Bible: John 1:1-18 / *CCC:* 422-483