

READING THE BIBLE

A Study Guide

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Chapter 1

BIBLE BASICS: READING THE BIBLE IN FAITH

Creating Readers of the Bible

There are a number of ways that an introduction to the Bible can be approached. Most often an introduction to the Bible is a survey of the Bible, in which each book is summarized for the reader and placed within its context in the history of Israel or early Christianity. There are also biblical introductions that explain and give examples of the methodologies used in studying the Bible. These books seek to train the reader in the different scholarly approaches to the texts of the Bible. Finally, there are introductions that focus more on the Bible as a text for spiritual reading. These books, often by focusing on the great themes in scripture, offer the reader an experience of the transforming power of the Bible as the word of God. It seemed to me that there was a need for an introduction to the Bible that combined all three of these approaches. The purpose of this book is to create competent readers of the Bible. This requires a combination of breadth and depth. For readers to be adequately introduced to the art of reading the Bible, they should know what is in the Bible, when the books were written, and what were the major historical contexts out of which the Bible grew. Competent readers should also be familiar with and be able to use some of the major methodologies for studying the Bible. In other words, a competent reader should know what kinds of questions to ask the text. Finally, competent readers or—better—readers who will be inspired to grow in competence will be ones who have experienced the power of the Bible as it touches them personally and as it engages the world in which they live.

As a survey of the Bible, this text will introduce readers to all of the major sections of the Bible and explain the kinds of texts found in each section. Several books from each section will be chosen for deeper investigation. (There will not be a summary of every book.) There will be a study of the selected book in general and then a more thorough investigation of individual texts from that book. Each text will be examined according to its historical background (world behind the text), according to its literary genre, structure, rhetoric, and themes (world of the text), and according to its possibilities for engaging its contemporary readers (world in front of the text). As we study each text in these three ways, we will be training readers in the methodologies appropriate to each kind of investigation. In all of our study, however, the intention of this introduction is to open up the Bible for readers to experience the text as the word of God with power to engage their lives. So, although this text is meant to be used in the classroom and claims to be an academic text, I do not believe that an academic study of the Bible should remain detached from the experience and involvement of its readers.

The Bible as the Word of God

Word of God in Context

How a person understands the nature of the Bible determines how that person will read it. Is the Bible a great piece of literature? Is it an enlightened and holy book of a religious group? Is it the word of God? For Catholics it is all three. Christians and Jews generally believe that the Bible is the word of God. However, if you pay attention to what different groups or persons say about the Bible as God's word, you will soon realize that they are not all making the same claim. Although there is no absolute definition of what "word of God" means for Catholics, the following is an attempt to delineate some of the ways Catholics have tended to define what it does and does not mean. First, there is not one correct meaning for any given text. The fathers of the church spoke of the literal meaning, the allegorical meaning, and the spiritual meaning. There are different

ways of reading the text and different meanings possible for it. Catholics have never maintained that a literal reading of the text is the one and only way, or even the best way, to read the Bible. Second, the church has traditionally recognized, but recently stated much more clearly, that the text should be understood first in its original historical context. Again, we often find the church fathers discussing the original situation of a given text. Today our tools for understanding and retrieving the original context of a text are greatly improved, and our appreciation of historicity and social situation is heightened, but the principle remains the same. Third, Catholics have never held the position of "*sola scriptura*" (scripture alone as determinative of faith). The Bible is one of three sources of teaching in the church. It may be the first among equals, but it is never to be used and interpreted alone, outside the context of the traditions of the church (the history of interpretation) and outside the context of the believing community following the Spirit in its own day and time.

Word of God, Inspiration, and Inerrancy

The expression **word of God** can be used in three ways. Jesus Christ is described as the Word of God incarnate. He is the fullest expression of what God has to say to humans. Second, God spoke to Moses and the prophets. The words that they received from God can be called the word of God. Finally, though, the Bible as a written text in its final form is called the word of God. This does not have exactly the same meaning as the other two uses. Not everything in the Bible is directly about Jesus Christ. Not everything in the Bible was given to its authors as a word of God like the law to Moses or the prophecies to Isaiah or Jeremiah. Rather, to say that the Bible is the word of God says that in its entirety the book expresses the relationship God has with humans and the plan God has for their salvation.

Related to this issue are several other expressions that are used to describe the word of God. Christians claim that the Bible is inspired. This does not mean that every word in the Bible was dictated to the authors or that every word is a word of God directed to humans for their salvation. There are many words in

the Bible that reflect human wisdom and are human opinion. Rather, the claim of **inspiration** says that the entire book expresses God's desire for humans. Even the human wisdom and opinions, the historical facts that might be inaccurate, the prescientific understanding of how the world works and how human biology and psychology function, all of this is inspired by God. The writers were being led by the Spirit of God in such a way that the book, even when it is human opinion, will further the divine-human relationship.

Christians will also claim that the Bible is inerrant. Some Christians mean by this that no line, story, law, or expression in the Bible contains any error whatsoever. Catholics do not hold such a literal understanding of inerrancy. For Catholics, **inerrancy** means that as a whole the Bible does not lead to error but will lead to a deeper and truer understanding of and relationship with God. In *Dei Verbum* 11, the Vatican Council notes that "we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture firmly, faithfully and without error teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures." The Bible teaches without error a truth that is for our salvation. There is no claim of total inerrancy, where every historical or scientific fact is regarded as true. The truth claim of the Bible is restricted to God's plan for human salvation.

Even understood only in the context of truths for human salvation, however, an individual reader can misunderstand the Bible, can take a text out of context, and can enter into error. Many of the great heresies of the church have come from the Bible, and their proponents have believed that they were accurately reading the Bible. There is nothing about the Bible that guarantees that a reader will not ever be led into error by something that he or she reads in the Bible. That is why for Catholics the reading and interpreting of the Bible must take into account the Bible as a unified whole, must be aware of the tradition of interpretation in the church, and must be done in the context of the authoritative teaching of the *magisterium*. These three elements guarantee the reader that he or she will not be led into error.

"Mistakes" or Healthy Dialogue?

It is very easy to find in the Bible contradictions, inaccuracies, misunderstandings, and even some rather poor and inadequate theological reflections. There are two stories of creation, three stories of patriarchs pretending that their beautiful wife is only their sister, two versions of David's introduction to the court of Saul, and two complete histories of the monarchy. Different authors took up the same event or topic and developed it in their own way. There are critics of Christianity and Judaism who eagerly pore over the Bible finding all these "mistakes." The Bible is not a static, homogeneous, and consistent document. It is a document that developed over the course of at least one thousand years. It is a document that was written in numerous historical, social, and even religious situations. Although its final compilers sometimes did some editing to join the books together as a whole and give them some framework and similar form, for the most part there was no final editor who went through to eliminate all contradictions and inconsistencies. The document we have has various authors from various times with various points of view.

Even beyond that, though, this document is self-reflective and self-criticizing. The different books of the Bible will often reflect on earlier books and expand on their ideas, change their ideas, refute their ideas, and even mock their ideas. As some of the early stories and texts take on a "canonical" status (the story of the Exodus and the giving of the Law), later writers used these texts to develop their own themes. The prophets took up the stories and laws from Genesis and Exodus and reworked them, reapplied them, and even transformed them. The wisdom writings took up the traditions of the law and the prophets and mocked them, contested them, invoked them, or celebrated them. The earlier texts were presumed to express God's word, but were never thought to be so sacrosanct that they could not be engaged in dialogue. The Book of Job, for example, expanded images in Jeremiah (cursing the day of his birth), called into question the theology embedded in the Book of Deuteronomy (the Deuteronomistic principle states that the good will be blessed and the wicked cursed), and turned Psalm 8 on its head (Psalm 8 marvels that God pays so

much positive attention to lowly man; Job marvels that God pays so much attention to torment lowly man). To read the Bible is to engage in a dialectic, an ongoing wrestling match with God's revelation. The Bible is not a static expression of God's will for us or a finished historical account of how people in the past wrestled with the word of God. The Bible is a living arena for an ongoing engagement with God's word. The reader of the Bible must be willing to enter the fray to come to know the word of God revealed for our salvation. The Bible enshrines the process of God's word finding voice—sometimes faint, sometimes strong, sometimes building on previous words, sometimes tearing them down. To lift one story or saying out of the Bible and assign it the status of God's definitive command to us is to misunderstand the origins of the Bible and to shortchange the dynamic nature of God's word.

The Canon of the Bible

A second important issue confronting readers of the Bible is the "canon": which books are accepted as belonging in the authoritative collection of the Bible? The canon signifies those books that are measured (with a reed, *qaneh*) and found to belong to the self-definition of the community. They are normative and so form the measure of the community's identity. In the course of the life of the people of Israel, certain stories, poems, sayings, laws, and rituals, by their use and reuse, came to be fixed as central and normative for the life of the community. As these were written down, their written forms also became fixed and normative. Over time the collection of these writings became fixed and normative. By about 400 B.C.E. there was a fixed collection that was the Law (what we know as the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch). By 300 B.C.E. the historical books took form, and by 200 B.C.E. the collection of prophets was final. In a similar way, but over much less time, the gospels and letters of the New Testament were used, collected, and finally fixed. The process of canonization took time, was dependent on use, and was the consensus of the community.

One of the major issues of the canon for the early Christian community was whether to include the Old Testament (the Jewish

scriptures) as part of the books that the community considered to be inspired by God and normative for the life of the Christian community. Some in the early Christian community felt that the revelation that had taken place in Jesus surpassed and made unnecessary the revelation that had previously come to the Jews. Others went so far as to claim that the God of the Hebrew scriptures (Yahweh) was an inferior or even evil god, and that the Old Testament revelation was opposed to the revelation of Jesus Christ. The great majority of the community, however, realized that the revelation of God in the Old Testament was essential for understanding the revelation in Jesus Christ. They understood that, although the revelation in Jesus Christ surpassed the previous revelation, it was firmly based on that revelation and was a fulfillment of that revelation. They realized that the God and Father of Jesus Christ was the same God who was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and who revealed himself to Moses and who spoke through the prophets. They saw clearly that this understanding was central to the message of Jesus, to the letters of Paul, and to the gospels.

A second issue in accepting the Old Testament as part of the canon was which books to accept. In the first centuries of the early church there was not one accepted version of the Jewish scriptures. For the most part, the Jewish communities of Palestine and the East tended to accept a smaller number of books as part of their canon than the Jewish communities in Egypt and the West. The Jews in the East tended not to use the books that were, or were supposed to have been, written in Greek. The Hellenistic Jewish communities (those in Asia Minor, Egypt, and the West) tended to use the books that were in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Jewish scriptures) and these included some later books written in Greek. The Christian communities, especially those in the West, used the Greek Septuagint as the Old Testament in their scriptures. Over time the Jewish community as a whole rejected the books that were written in Greek, and so there came to be a Jewish canon that was different from the Christian canon for the Old Testament. Originally, however, the Christians merely chose to use the books of the Jewish scriptures that other Hellenistic Jews were using. Later, during the time of

the Reformation, Luther and the reformers chose to accept as canonical only those books in the Hebrew scriptures of the Jews of his day, those books that were originally written in Hebrew. Therefore, at the time of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, two different Christian canons became fixed. The Protestant canon of the Old Testament included thirty-nine books. The other books that were in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox canon, the books thought to have been written in Greek, were referred to as the Apocrypha ("hidden") by the Protestants. The Roman and Orthodox canon of the Old Testament included forty-six books, but called the books that the Protestants referred to as the Apocrypha, Deuterocanonical (secondarily canonical).

The Process of Creating the Bible

Even before the process of creating a canon, there is the process of creating individual books of the Bible. This process involves using and reworking earlier material, collecting related texts, and finally editing the book as a whole. The first stage in the process of the Bible is the stage of action and speech. An event happens and a word is spoken. The next stage is the stage of retelling and interpretation. The event is interpreted and described; the speech is repeated orally. The third stage would be the collecting of various stories or sayings together. We find in the Bible collections of stories about Joseph, Jacob, and Abraham. We find collections of sayings by Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. We find collections of laws about marriage, property, and ritual. At some point in time after the events and persons involved, later generations would gather the related stories into a collection. Stories about the patriarchs would have been joined together. The sayings of the prophets would have been collected by their disciples and put into a collection of sayings. Stories about the lives of the prophets would have been similarly collected. There is evidence that before the gospels there were collections of the sayings of Jesus (Q is one notable example) and collections of miracle stories. When the books of the Bible were being finalized, some editors were responsible for gathering the

collections together and creating the books. Thus the collections of sayings of a prophet, sayings of his disciples, stories about the prophet, and even historical accounts taken from the historical books were all collected to be put into one scroll. This final collection often has a very noticeable structure. In the book of the prophet Isaiah, the words and stories about Isaiah son of Amoz come in chapters 1—39, whereas the sayings of his later disciples (Second and Third Isaiah) come in chapters 40—66. In the chapters devoted to Isaiah son of Amoz, the editors have placed the sayings about judgment first (1—12), followed by oracles against the nations (13—23), and then the words of consolation (28—35). These are followed by the stories about the life of Isaiah, the battle with Assyria, and the death of Hezekiah taken from 2 Kings (36—39). Although not all books have such a clear order, they were all put into some final structured form. The Gospel of Mark contains the sayings and deeds of Jesus, which were gathered together in earlier collections and used by Mark (the name we give to the final author of this gospel) to create his gospel. The overarching structure of the gospel is Mark's creation. The Bible enshrines a process that can be called "living text." There is no one point in the process that can be identified as inspired, or God's word, as opposed to the other points. However, the final canonical form is the form that is normative and declared by the church to be the inspired word of God. This does not take away from the fact that the text remains alive and constantly engages new readers in new situations.

Even after the Hebrew Bible became fixed and there were no changes allowed to the text, the process of the living text continued in commentaries, interpretations, and translations. The Septuagint, although a fairly literal translation into Greek of the Hebrew Bible, still interprets what is not understandable, changes what is deemed problematic, and in general updates the text for a new situation. The Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Bible, known as the Targums, are even more freewheeling with their translations as interpretations. The living text goes even further in the traditions of exposition, explanation, and commentary found in the Midrash and Talmud. For the Christian New Testament, Jerome's Vulgate (an early Latin translation of both the New and

Old Testaments) was an interpretation as well as translation and was for a time considered the inspired version of the Bible for Catholics in the West. The early church fathers commented on the texts in such a way that continued to give them new life and vitality. The councils of the church made the move away from merely restating the biblical text, to interpreting its meaning in a new context for a new time and yet never replacing the canonical version of the text.

Two forces are at work in the process of the "living Bible." Both are important and both may reflect the use and the respect given to the sacred writings. The first force is the force of variation, repetition, updating, and new creation. The scriptures were constantly being used for new reflection or being placed in a new context. They inspired new creations on the same model or genre, or inspired the desire to fill in the gaps in the older stories or laws. The second force is the force of canonization. This is the desire to save the great heritage as it is, the desire to make sure that the first force does not destroy or subvert the ancient tradition, the desire to use the texts over and over in their original form in all the places that God's people gather to pray and worship. We see this force in the placement of two stories of the same event side by side. Although it might not make logical sense in terms of the narrative to do this, it makes canonical sense in preserving the whole of the tradition.

The Meaning of the Bible

Every reading of the Bible is an engagement between the reader and the text that results in an effect on the reader that we call *meaning*. The question is how and where does the reader get the meaning of a text in this process of reading. It is possible to separate out three loci of meaning, or to find in the discourse three different players who contribute to the meaning of a text. These are the author, the text, and the reader. (This separation is artificial and overly simplistic, but does allow us to see the process of finding meaning in a text.) The three players, or three loci of meaning, are: the world behind the text, the world of the text, and the world in front of the text. It is important to point out that,

although different readers with different concerns and abilities tend to focus on one or the other of the loci of meaning, all three loci are important for any reading of the text. It is not possible to focus exclusively on the world behind the text without taking into account the text and the reader.

World behind the Text

The world behind the text refers to the world that generated the text. Primarily this means the author, who had a reason and purpose for writing the text. The author is male or female, Jew or Gentile, slave or free, peasant or retainer class, priest or lay. These characteristics affect the way the author produces the text and can sometimes be determined with a fair amount of accuracy. For the most part, though, there is very little in the biblical texts that reveals to us who the author was.

The social, historical, religious world in which the author lived is also an important feature of the world behind the text. Usually we know more about the world at the time of a text than we do about the author. Although we know very little if anything about the author of chapters 40–55 of the Book of Isaiah, we can reasonably place the writing to about 540 B.C.E. We know from other biblical books that are dated to the same period something about the religious life at the time and the religious innovations and developments that have taken place. We know from other ancient Near Eastern writings something of the history of that period, especially the decline and fall of the Babylonian Empire and the rise to power of Cyrus of Persia. The world behind the text involves the study of the persons or events that are the subject of the writing. If the text tells us about the life of David, we will want to find out if the text paints an accurate picture of David or even generally of the life of a royal family at that time.

Another aspect of the world behind the text is the language of the time. If we are interested in finding the meaning of the text, we need to know what the words, images, and expressions meant at that particular time in history. We need to understand how grammar worked and what idioms meant. Here, other writings from that period are indispensable for our study.

Finally, we want to know something about the original intended audience. Was the text written for all Jews, for a certain group of Jews, or for Gentiles? What was the audience's particular situation? The search for meaning in the world behind the text seeks to find out as much as possible about the persons and society that went into the making of and accepting the text in its original context. As modern readers, we want to know this so that we do not impose our own meanings onto the text. A word, action, or relationship can have quite a different meaning in a world so different from our own. It is important to remember that the world of the Bible is a foreign world. Context is everything in reading a text, and the original context is privileged in helping us to find meaning. If we do not understand the original context of a text, we might miss or misinterpret the humor, sarcasm, pathos, or tragedy of a story. What might seem like a very funny image to us could have very tragic overtones given a different historical context. Similarly what might seem like a rather bland statement of fact to us might be a hilarious mockery of an ancient situation or belief. A modern reader can never dispense with the work of placing the text as carefully as possible within the context of its genesis. However, the meaning of a biblical text is not restricted to what the original author intended for an original audience (especially because that is impossible to completely reconstruct without having the author present to interrogate).

World of the Text

The second locus of meaning is the text itself. The text is not the slave of the author, doing and saying only what was intended. Once the text is written, it takes on a life of its own, with power to continue to engage readers in meaning long after the author and the original purpose of the text have passed. The study of the world of the text focuses on the characteristics of the text that help the reader find meaning. Biblical texts can be studied in this way just like any other text. To understand what the text is saying to us, we want to know first the genre of the text. Is the text a narrative, a poem, a list, or an essay? If the text is a narrative, we will want to know who the protagonist is and who the

antagonist. How is each of the characters portrayed? What are the textual clues that tell us how to evaluate each character? We will also want to know about the narrator in the text. Is the narrator omniscient and reliable? When is the narrator narrating the story, and when is the narrator speaking directly to the reader? What is the plot of the story: the ascending action, the denouement, the descending action? Are there any plot twists in the story? If the text is poetry, we will examine the structure of the poem. What kinds of poetic devices are used and what images are employed? If the text is a list, we will want to know if it a list of laws, of offspring, or of articles for the Temple. How is this material arranged and what is left out? If the text is an essay, we will ask whether it is a sermon, a philosophical discourse, or a letter. What is the form that the essay takes? What rhetorical techniques are used to make the argument? All of these questions help us to understand the text itself. The meaning we will find here is the meaning we might be more accustomed to finding in a contemporary text. Any careful reader is aware of the ways that an author manipulates the feelings, expectations, and ideas of the reader to create an effect or make a point.

World in front of the Text

The third locus of meaning is the reader. When I described the second locus, I made it sound as if the text by itself creates a meaning, but of course that is an overstatement. The text can do nothing without a reader reading it. However, for the sake of clarity, it is helpful to separate the two. The reader as a locus of meaning comes to the text and must respond to the text. Clearly, the modern reader will respond to the biblical text differently than the ancient Jewish or Christian reader. What the reader brings to the text is an important part of the meaning of the text. In this way a modern Christian who reads the biblical prophets brings to the text two thousand years of Christian reflection on the prophetic message as fulfilled in Jesus. This is inevitable and not undesirable. It is legitimate as long as it is recognized to be what the reader is bringing and not what the author intended. Problems have arisen in biblical interpretation when readers believe that

what they bring to the text (Christian beliefs, modern sensibilities, modern science) are really in the text and were the intention of the author. That is to confuse the world in front of the text with the world behind the text.

The effort to find meaning in the world in front of the text starts with the experience and worldview of the reader. Usually some issue in the experience of the reader provides a lens to read the text. Feminist readers of the Bible have the experience of discrimination because of gender. Their experience is that the Bible is linked to the system of patriarchy that devalues women and their unique worldview. This experience is brought to the reading of the text. The text is engaged with this issue in the forefront. The text is questioned, challenged, reevaluated, and even rewritten. The danger for this method of finding meaning is when the experience of the reader is canonized as more important than the text or the author's intention. If this is the case, no real dialogue takes place. The reader becomes a bully, demanding that the text live up to the standards that the reader sets for it. The ideal situation occurs when readers come to the text honestly, bringing their concerns and experiences, engage the text openly, and allow the text to respond. This kind of engagement is a creative process of meaning giving that allows the text to mean much more than what was intended by the author. At the same time it allows the text to remain authentic and true without becoming the puppet of the reader.

Traditionally, academic biblical studies have focused primarily on the world behind the text, and only secondarily on the world of the text. For the most part, the world in front of the text was left for homilies, sermons, and spiritual reading. Recently, scholars have begun to recognize the importance of all three loci of meaning, even in academic study. Further they have realized that the reader's worldview, presuppositions, social location, and ideology influence any reading, even ones that claim to focus exclusively on the world behind the text. Scholars now realize that it is imperative that they acknowledge the world in front of the text to keep every reading honest.

The Bible as History

An important issue in biblical studies and in Christian faith communities is the "historicity" of the Bible. To understand the Bible as history we need to make a distinction between historical fact and historical discourse. If we are concerned with historical fact in the Bible and we judge it by modern standards, it is easy to find "untruths" in the Bible. There are sometimes two contrasting or even contradictory accounts of the same event. Recent archaeological discoveries or discoveries of ancient writings have shown us that certain "facts" are false. A simple example is Daniel's references to the kings of Babylonia and Persia, which are incorrect. It is not correct to reduce the possibilities for reading the Bible to two. It is myth, story, or theology, which are not concerned with historical facts, or it is history by modern standards and does relate accurate historical facts throughout. There is a third and more accurate way to approach the Bible as history. First, the Bible is an ancient document. Therefore, the Enlightenment concern for science, historical fact, and rigorous objectivity is not part of the biblical worldview. Second, the Bible emphasizes that the stories being told are not fiction or myths like the myths of surrounding cultures. The concern for linear history is what makes the Bible original and unique as a literary document of its time. One of the great insights of the Bible is that the relationship of God and God's chosen people is found in history and not in some mythical, cyclical reality.

It is important to remember that the Bible is a discourse between the text and the reader. It is not productive to step outside the discourse and make judgments concerning claims that the discourse is not making. To go looking for Noah's ark is really a refusal to engage the discourse that is the word of God. Looking for Noah's ark is focusing on only one element in the discourse. The discourse is not saying to the reader to go and find the ark and you will know this is all true. Rather, the discourse is asking the reader to enter this world, this story, and see how God works and how humans fail and what are the possibilities for human-divine relationship. These possibilities are unique in that they are not mythic but historical, but that is quite different from

attributing to the discourse the claim to be telling the reader about historical facts. Looking for the facts in a story is to become distracted from the real meaning of the discourse and so to miss what the biblical text is asking of us.

To make the argument that God is at work in history is very different from making the argument that historical facts prove the existence and power of God. Fundamentalists try to go the second road and are not faithful to the discourse of the Bible. To argue over facts, try to prove them, hold on to them, and claim them as divine revelation is not the point and intention of the narrative.

Genres of the Bible

The word *Bible*, as most people know, means books (or library). The Bible is a collection of books. The books are also collections. In short, the Bible is a collection of collections. This gives us a great deal of variety in the Bible. There are many different kinds of writing in the Bible, and sometimes even similar genres are from very different periods of history and so must be read in very different ways. It is always a matter of how you listen to the words in the Bible. The books of the Bible make a claim to be the word of God and to be able to be trusted, but different genres do this differently. As a reader of the Bible, we must take these different claims seriously. To lump the Bible all together as the word of God homogeneously presented and homogeneously making the same claims is to misunderstand the Bible and the word of God. The genres of the Bible range from poetry to narrative prose, to lists of laws and genealogies, to sermons and letters. The types of poetry range from love poetry, to funeral laments, to hymns of praise used in worship. The types of narratives range between archetypal (or mythical) narratives of primeval history, to folk legends, to legends explaining how things got their names, to court histories of kings, to historical novels, to apocalyptic visions. We have lists of laws that are apodictic (general prohibitions) and laws that are casuistic (accompanied by the specific punishment that corresponds to the crime). We have discourses that are philosophical essays, sermons, and letters. The great range of genres in the Bible requires the reader to make a distinction between the kinds

of claims each kind of writing is making. It would be a mistake to read the historical novel of Esther in the same way you read the court history of David or the apocalyptic vision of Daniel.

The Text of the Bible

The Bible that you are reading is a modern English translation—but a translation of what? Do we have the original Bible somewhere? No! As noted earlier, the text of the Hebrew Bible was fixed about 100 B.C.E. The text of the New Testament was fixed by a council of the church in about 400 C.E. The earliest “Bibles” were manuscripts of individual books. During the time of Jesus, there would have been a scroll of Isaiah, a scroll of Genesis, and so on. Until 1947 the oldest copies of any books of the Bible that we had access to were from the fourth century C.E. This is perhaps nine hundred years after much of the Hebrew Bible was written in its final form and two to three hundred years after the books of the New Testament were written. In 1947 scrolls that dated to the last century B.C.E. were discovered in caves next to the Dead Sea (the Dead Sea Scrolls). These copies of books of the Hebrew Bible increased our knowledge of the text immensely. However, we do not have anything close to the original autograph copy of any of the books of the Bible. The copies that we have are hand-copied copies of copies of copies....

In the process of hand-copying a text, a number of problems could occur. One frequent problem is known as haplography—the copyist’s eye jumped ahead to the same or similar word later in the text and so a section of the text was skipped in the copied manuscript. Another mistake is known as dittography—the copyist’s eye went back to the same or similar word earlier in the text and so a section of the text was repeated. Sometimes the copyist would simply miswrite a word as a different word. Sometimes the copyist would try to clean up a text that the copyist thought was incorrect or too difficult to understand. Also some copyists would make notes in the margins of the text and later copyists would include these notes in the text. These are called *glosses*. In the hundreds of years of copying the texts before any copies survived for us, many changes and mistakes were made. Now when we study the Book

of Isaiah, for example, and examine the hundred oldest and best manuscripts of that text, they are not the same at all. Some of the differences between manuscripts are minor and easily figured out, but some are major and impossible to decide which is the original or best reading. For the New Testament, because the amount of time elapsed in copying before the surviving texts is much smaller, the textual differences are minor compared to those found in the Hebrew Bible. The point of this discussion is to make it clear that we do not have the original text of any of the books. The Bible text you are reading is a translation of a text, which is a composite, based on decisions of scholars about which reading is the best in each particular case. So in verse 5 the compilers of the Greek or Hebrew text may have chosen the reading from the text found in Alexandria; for verse 8 they have chosen the reading found in the text housed in the Vatican; and on and on. Thus there are major decisions being made about what the text says long before the student of the Bible ever gets to read it.

There are scholarly versions of the Hebrew Bible (the MT) the Greek Old Testament (LXX) and the New Testament (NT) that are generally accepted and used as the starting point for modern translations. Even when all the translations begin with the same reconstructed text, however, the translations can be quite different. Translations tend to be either literal or interpretive. A *literal translation* will be faithful to the exact wording of the text and often even to the word order of the text. These translations will often be difficult to read and understand for the modern reader. The value of such a translation is that it allows the reader to experience more accurately the Hebrew or Greek mind. An *interpretive translation* seeks to put ideas, expressions, and experiences into language that is faithful to the meaning of the original but understandable for the modern reader. The decision to interpret can be made at many different levels. A first level has to do with the difference in grammar between Hebrew and English. In a strictly literal rendering, Genesis 3:1 says that "the serpent was crafty from all the animals." Hebrew has no superlative form (i.e., "best" or "most"). Instead, Hebrew uses the word "from" to create a superlative. This is known as the "partitive." So whereas the Hebrew literally says "crafty from all animals," this really means "most crafty"

or "more crafty than any other." Although not a major change, it is still an interpretation to translate this into English as: "the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal."

At another level, the translator must contend with images and idioms in Hebrew that have no counterpart in English. The Hebrew of Amos 4:6 quotes God as saying, "I gave you cleanness of teeth." In the context, it is clear that the author uses this image as a figurative expression for saying that God caused a famine. Should the translator help the reader to understand the meaning of the text by translating the figurative expression as "I afflicted you with a famine"? Or should the translator translate it literally and hope that the reader realizes that God is not claiming to be a dental hygienist? The translator must decide what images and figures of speech need to be translated in a way that the reader will be able to understand. (Many of the more scholarly translations tend to translate the image literally and use footnotes to explain the meaning.)

A third level, at which translations can interpret or be literal, is the level of theology. Translating a Hebrew or Greek word into English always involves a number of possibilities. It will make a difference which word a translator chooses, when one or more of the possibilities carry theological implications. To choose to translate the Hebrew *berit* as "covenant" instead of "pact" or "agreement" makes a difference. The word *covenant* carries many theological connotations. Translators have to make the decision whether they want the word to carry these connotations. The reader must also be aware that all the meaning we modern Christians associate with the word *covenant* may not be intended at this point in the text. Another good example is the word *ruach*, in Hebrew. Because it can mean "wind," "breath," and "spirit," when is it appropriate to translate *ruach elohim* as the "wind of God" (mighty wind), as the "breath of God," or as the "Spirit of God"?

In all of this, readers should be aware that the translation of the Bible that they are reading is based on a best guess about the original text and is an interpretation influenced by many factors. A particular translation (such as the Vulgate or the King James Version) should never be canonized as the word of God.

Order of Study

It is possible to study the Bible in three different orders—chronologically, thematically, or canonically. Many introductions to the Bible study the Bible in the chronological order in which scholars believe that it was written. Among the prophets, a student would read Amos and Hosea before Jeremiah and Ezekiel. It is possible to separate out texts in Genesis and Exodus and study the oldest sections (the parts known as the Yahwist source) first. A thematic study of the Bible looks at themes that run throughout the entire Bible—themes of justice, mercy, sin, redemption, covenant, and so forth. This kind of study is not concerned with when a book was written or where it is placed in the canon. Theologies of the Old Testament and the New Testament often take this form. Finally, a study of the Bible can follow the order of the books as they appear in the canon. Although the Bible is clearly a collection of different books, it is also a fixed collection with a definite story line. In the Old Testament, from Genesis 1 to the end of 2 Maccabees there is a loose and repetitive, but chronological, narrative of God's dealings with God's chosen people. The wisdom literature and then the sayings of the prophets follow this history. In the New Testament the gospels precede the earlier letters of Paul, and these are followed by other letters and the Book of Revelation. It is my decision in this textbook to study the Bible in the order in which the books are placed in the Christian canon. I do this because I believe that the overarching canonical narrative is central to the theology of the Bible. The Bible is telling a story of God relating to God's people in history. This story has a beginning, middle, and end. We should take the story seriously in the order in which it is told and in the logic that it creates.

Using Your Bible

Citations

The text of the Bible used in this book is the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). Every translation of the Bible will have

different titles, notes, cross-references, and related materials. It is worth the readers' time to acquaint themselves with the aids to study that their Bible offers. First, to use the aids properly or to read any discussion of biblical texts, it is essential to understand the method for citing biblical texts. This is not uniform from translation to translation. What is recommended by the Modern Language Association is not what is normally used in translations of the Bible or even in most scholarly articles. The method of citation used in this book follows that used in the *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*. Simply put, a citation of a text begins with the abbreviation of the book (usually in three or four letters) followed by a space then the chapter number of the book, then a colon, then the verse or verses—for example: Gen 3:10. (You will find forms of citing the text that use either a comma or a period instead of the colon between chapter and verse, and you will find some forms that use Roman instead of Arabic numerals. Also, the accepted abbreviations for books can vary.) If a citation includes more than one verse, there is a dash between the first and last verse of the citation. For example: Exod 12:29–36. If a citation lists more than one verse and the verses are not continuous, a comma is placed between the verses. For example: Lev 23:4, 23, 26. If the citation includes more than one book or more than one chapter of the same book, a semicolon separates these. For example: Num 3:45; 8:14. If the citation runs not just for several verses but for several chapters of a book, a dash is placed between the chapter and verse that open the citation and the chapter and verse that close the citation. For example: Deut 12:1—26:19. In reading citations in your Bible, you will also notice that sometimes there will be letters after the verse number. These represent two different things. The letters "a," "b," and "c" refer to the parts of a verse. Often a verse will be made up of different sentences, clauses, or sections that need to be distinguished. A good example of this is Gen 2:4b, which is the beginning of the second story of creation. The first story of creation ends with Gen 2:4a. The letters "f" or "ff," after a verse number, indicate that the following verse or verses are to be included in the citation. Matt 4:15f means that verses 15 and 16 are included in the citation.

Cross-References and Footnotes

Cross-references, which often appear to the side of or beneath the text, are helpful aids provided by most translations of the Bible. Because so many texts of the Bible quote or allude to other texts of the Bible, it is imperative that a careful reader know what text is being quoted or alluded to. The Old Testament background for the New Testament is essential for understanding the New Testament.

The translators of the Bible will often give footnotes to explain the meanings of places, events, or concepts that might be foreign to the reader. The notes can also explain the reasons for a certain translation (giving either the literal rendering or the interpretive meaning), can alert the reader to puns or plays on words, and can inform the reader of changes that have been made to the text (often by rearranging the order of verses or leaving some verses out altogether).

Learning Achievements

After studying this chapter, the student should be able to:

- Define what Catholics mean by the word of God, inerrancy, and inspiration.
- Define the canon and describe the process of creating it.
- Describe the process of “writing” the books of the Bible and the “living Bible.”
- Describe the three loci of meaning: World behind the Text; World of the Text; and World in front of the Text.
- Differentiate between historical fact and historical discourse.
- Discuss textual criticism and the difference in translations.
- Read citations and use cross-references and footnotes in their Bible.

Recommended Reading

Bowley, James E., ed. *Living Traditions of the Bible: Scripture in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Practice*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999. Especially see Joseph Fitzmyer, “Scripture in the Catholic Tradition,” 145–161.

Brown, Raymond E. *Biblical Exegesis and Church Doctrine*. Ramsey, N.J.: Paulist, 1985.

Gillingham, Susan E. *One Bible, Many Voices: Different Approaches to Biblical Studies*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998.

Grant, Robert M., and David Tracy. *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*. 2d ed. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1984.

Schneiders, Sandra. *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*. 2d ed. Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1999.