

## Introduction to the Bible

The whole point of reading and understanding the Bible is to encounter God, understand the revelation he has given us and grow in faith.

But, we do not read alone. We read the Bible within the tradition of the Church to benefit from the holiness and wisdom of those who have gone before us.

As long ago as the 5<sup>th</sup> century, St. Jerome, a Father and Doctor of the Catholic Church insisted that “Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ!”

## How the Bible speaks to Catholics

Catholics believe that there are different ways to understand the Bible:

- the literal sense: the meaning of Scripture is conveyed by the words and discovered by critical explanation or interpretation of a text, following the rules of sound interpretation.  
All other senses of Sacred Scripture are based on the literal.
- the spiritual sense: In light of the unity of God’s plan, not just what the text of Scripture says literally; realities and events about which it speaks can also be signs.
- the moral sense: the events we read in Scripture should lead us to act justly and fairly to live morally.
- the allegorical sense: we can find a more profound understanding of events by seeing their significance in Christ. An example of this would be the crossing of the Red Sea – seen as a sign of Christ’s victory and of Christian baptism.
- the anagogical sense (Greek: *anagoge*, “leading”): the realities and events in the Bible, in terms of their eternal significance, lead us home to God. So the Church on earth is a sign of the heavenly Jerusalem.

## Catholic principles for reading the Bible are:

1. The Catholic Church believes that God is the principal author of Sacred Scripture.
2. God used certain people who wrote in human language at a particular time and place in history. Their writings reflected them – their personalities and their educations. The truth that they conveyed is differently presented and expressed in the various types of historical writing, in prophetic and poetical texts, and in other forms of literary expression.
3. Catholics seek to understand what a sacred author is saying to be true, distinguishing that from something he is using as an image to help them understand the truths which Catholics call the “deposit of faith” or Divine Revelation. The Bible is primarily concerned with telling these truths, which are without error.

## To help Catholics grow in faith as they read Scripture

The Church gives three important points for interpreting and understanding the Bible. She says we should:

1. be attentive to the content and unity of the whole Scripture (Catechism, 112). It all fits together as a coherent vision, so we shouldn't just look at selected parts in isolation.
2. read the Bible within the living tradition of the whole Church (Catechism, 113). The Holy Spirit guides the Church in interpreting Scripture; and we find many examples of how the Saints, Popes, Early Church Fathers and Mothers, and Church Councils have commented on Scripture and its meaning throughout history.
3. pay attention to the coherence of the truths of faith among themselves and within the whole plan of Revelation" (Catechism, 114). The entire deposit of faith forms a wonderful unity – doctrine sheds light on Scripture, and Scripture on doctrine.

## The Bible is not a book; it is a library of 73 books

The word "Bible" comes from a Greek plural noun, *ta biblia*, meaning *the books*. The Bible is not just a book; it is rather a collection of 73 books, a library which contains many books stemming from very different periods of time, written in various languages, having many different "authors" and having been subjected to the influence of many different cultures.

## The Bible is not "Scientific History", but a Faith Narrative

History as we know it and as it is taught now has to pay attention to narrating exactly what has happened and how it happened. The Bible does not fall in this category.

- In biblical times throughout the then-known world, history was kept alive in oral tradition, being passed on from one generation to the next, century after century. Its purpose was to explain why things are as they are. Why is there so much beauty? It is because God created it. Why is there also so much evil? Because the humans God had created turned away from him and disobeyed him.
- Heroic deeds were attributed to ancestors in story form, often in exaggerated ways.
- Only from around the year 1000 BCE were these "oral stories" gradually entrusted to paper. Also the Gospels in the New Testament knew this process: stories about Jesus first "lived on" for many decades in oral tradition and in early Christian communities, before eventually being written down and becoming "the four Gospels".

## Old Testament (BCE – Before Common Era, or before Christ)

The first part of the Bible, the Old Testament, is common to both Jews and Christians (with some differences). Jews and the Protestants recognise only the books that were written in Hebrew – 39 of them, which are placed into three categories with further subdivisions. They are called the Torah, Nebi'im and Ketubim.

- Torah means “law” – not so much in the legal sense but more as instruction. We know this first part of the Jewish Bible as Pentateuch (the “five scrolls”), consisting of the five books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.
- Nebi'im means “Prophets” – and this section is subdivided into two parts, the Former Prophets (which we now call the Historical Books), consisting of: Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel and 1-2 Kings and the Later Prophets, consisting of four scrolls, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Scroll of the Twelve. This contains the writings of the 12 so-called Minor Prophets: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi.
- Ketubim means “writings” – and this section consists of 13 books: Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Canticle of Canticles (Song of Songs), Ruth, Lamentations, Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes), Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah and 1-2 Chronicles.

Catholics recognise seven books that are not in the Protestant Canon (a total of 46), which were written in Greek (these are called deuterocanonical). The seven books are: Tobit, Judith, Ben Sirach or Ecclesiasticus, Baruch and 1-2 Maccabees.

Unlike the Jewish Canon, the Catholic Canon is made up of four main parts:

- the Pentateuch (literally meaning the “five scrolls”) containing the same five books as found in the Torah.
- the Historical Books
- the Wisdom Books
- the Prophetic Books and the Book of Daniel (which is half prophetic and half apocalyptic)

## and the New Testament (CE – Common Era)

To complete the Catholic Canon, we need to mention all the New Testament books that belong to the above list. The formation of the second part of the Bible, the New Testament, is in three stages:

- the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles
- the Epistles – Paul’s letters, the letter to the Hebrews and the Letters to the entire Church
- and the Book of Revelation of John.

Above all, the Bible is for the believing Jew and Christian *God’s Revelation*, one of the special sources and unique record of God’s self-communication. God can, of course, also be

known through nature; but in a very particular way, God chose to reveal himself through the written word as is now found in the Bible. This, indeed, is the main characteristic of the Bible. It is not primarily a collection of truths, laws and commands.

Much more than that, through the Bible, God reveals who he is and how much he has loved and still loves the world and humanity – so much, in fact, that he came as a human being in Jesus to tell us what God is like.

## Writing styles (or genres)

There are different ways of telling a story; and they correspond to different needs in the life of a group. The literature that arose in the Old Testament included:

- *stories*: We recall the accounts of the past.
- *epics*: a long poem derived from ancient oral tradition, narrating the deeds and adventures of heroic or legendary figures, which are grand in scale.
- *laws*: were given to ensure a good relationship with God; for example, Moses and the Ten Commandments.
- *the liturgy, celebrations and rituals*: Just as family meals bind the family together, religious celebrations and rituals bind people and God together.
- *poems, canticles and psalms*: are expressions of sentiments and faith.
- *the oracles of the prophets*: solemn words said to have come from God.
- *teaching*: Priests and prophets give instruction - and this includes stories and tales (parables)
- *the Wisdom writings* are reflections on the big questions: what is life, death, love? Why is there evil and suffering?

And the New Testament has the following four distinct parts (or: genres):

- four Gospels: the Good News of Christ's Life, Death and Resurrection; these Gospels are not meant as a biography or history, but are a proclamation of faith
  - three so-called Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke
  - the Gospel of John, which is more theological.
- the Acts of the Apostles: about the early Church
- the Letters of Paul and the so-called Catholic Epistles.
- the Book of Revelation

## All the books are quite different from one another

They were written by different people who lived in different centuries and different circumstances which tell us about the Covenant, the agreement, which God made with Israel through Moses (the Old Covenant) and which he fulfilled in Jesus Christ (the New Covenant). The process of writing them went on for almost ten centuries – and gradually all of them were brought together in one Bible.

## The timelines of the Bible

See the following timeline of all the books in the Bible (*with writing down and literary activity in italics*). All dates are approximate. The timeline is based on traditionally accepted timeframes from the New Jerusalem Bible.

### Old Testament

Until 10 <sup>th</sup> Century	<i>important place to faith memory being passed on through mainly the oral tradition; therefore, very little literary or recorded activity;</i>
After 10 <sup>th</sup> Century	<i>literary activity begins on a larger scale; first written records of The Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy)</i>
Around 750 BCE	Amos; Hosea; Micah; Primo-Isaiah
630-600 BCE	Zephaniah; Jeremiah; Nahum; Habakkuk
Exilic:	Ezekiel; Deutero-Isaiah:  Deuteronomistic history gradually taking shape
Post-Exilic	Trito-Isaiah; Haggai; Joel; Zechariah; Malachi; Obadiah <i>final redaction of The Pentateuch (see names above) by the priests</i> the Priestly Historical Books: 1-2 Chronicles; Ezra; Nehemiah; final edition of the Deuteronomistic History: Joshua, Judges 1-2 Samuel; 1-2 Kings, the Wisdom Books: Job; Proverbs; Song of Songs: many Psalms
From 4 <sup>th</sup> Century	350-200 BCE: Jonah; Tobit; Esther; Ecclesiastes  200-175 BCE: Ben Sirach; Daniel; 2 Maccabees (Yes, 2 Maccabees came before 1 Maccabees!!)  100-50 BCE: 1 Maccabees; Judith; Wisdom

### New Testament

50-52 CE	two Letters to the Thessalonians
56 CE	(or possibly 63 CE): Philippians
57 CE	1st Corinthians and Galatians
61-63 CE	Colossians; Ephesians; Philemon; 1 Timothy; Titus
63 CE	Gospel Of Mark; James; 1 Peter
67 CE	2 Timothy; Hebrews
70 CE	Matthew; Luke; Acts; Jude
95 CE:	Revelation; Gospel of John

## **Most importantly, God speaks to us on every page of the Bible...**

just as he spoke to the people of earlier times. This long letter, written down by many people, comes from us from the heart of God, from his love. God knows and loves each one of us, and he speaks to each of us individually.