

# Introduction to the Bible



# Introduction to the Bible

A Catholic Guide to Studying Scripture

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## *Preface*

During the generations of my parents and grandparents, Catholicism and personal Bible reading were not normally associated with one another. Sure, the Bible was revered; its presence evoked an awe associated with divine holiness. Most Catholic homes had a family Bible, usually with gilt-edged pages and filled with pages of religious art. More often than not, the Bible held an honored place in the family living room, and contained the baptism, marriage, and funeral records of the family. Catholics knew that there were people in the church who studied the Bible; surely the parish pastor had read and understood some of it. But rarely would a lay Catholic ever break the spine of the family Bible and actually begin to read.

Our Protestant neighbors were the ones who read the Bible. In fact, the Bible was what their faith was about. But Catholics, we had the Mass, the sacraments, the catechism, personal devotions, Mary, and the saints. These were the ways we experienced the presence of God and learned about our religion. What more could we need?

There are lots of historical reasons for this Catholic state of affairs in the middle of the twentieth century. The church had an exaggerated fear of private interpretation of the Bible. Couldn't reading one's own Bible lead to all sorts of false understanding? Better to let the church teach us what we needed to know.

But all this started rapidly changing in the 1960s. One of the most significant changes of the Second Vatican Council was the church's direct encouragement for Catholics to rediscover the Bible. The reformed liturgy contained a wide selection of readings from both the Old and New

Testaments. The church placed Sacred Scripture at the heart of liturgical preaching, religious education, and personal devotions. Catholics began to be exposed to biblical texts that they had never heard, and many started reading the Bible like never before.

Unlike the Catholicism of my parents and grandparents, my life as a Catholic has been infused with this biblical renewal in the church. When I was still a teenager, I heard about a group of priests, sisters, and lay-people in my city who were forming a Catholic method of Bible study called Little Rock Scripture Study. They were gathering people in parishes to study the Bible and discuss it together. I had no idea in the mid-70s that this fledgling movement in my town of Little Rock would grow so rapidly and be so influential in determining the direction of my life.

As I attended a Catholic university in another city, I realized what a fascinating experience studying the Bible could be. After taking my first undergraduate classes in the Bible, I was hooked. I knew that this sacred book would become critically important as my life progressed. Scripture became the foundation of my personal and professional life as I continued to pursue advanced degrees in biblical study and to teach and write in this growing field.

Catholic biblical scholarship had been advancing in the academic world since Pope Pius XII gave it his highest endorsement in a 1943 encyclical called *Divino Afflante Spiritu*. The Jesuit institute where I studied was one of the global centers of Catholic scholarship that had prepared the way for the biblical renewal that was bursting out in the church. During this time, Catholic biblical scholars, who had been quietly doing their work in “ivory towers” for decades, began to lecture and publish widely on the Bible. It didn’t take long for Catholic scholars to catch up with their more advanced Protestant colleagues. With the endorsement of the Pope and bishops, rooted in solid scholarship, and impelled by a spirit of renewal that was palpably alive in the church, the Catholic biblical renewal was underway.

In the decades after Vatican II, Catholic parishes could not keep pace with the desire of Catholics to learn about the Bible. We were reclaiming our legacy and resurrecting a lost part of our heritage. Little Rock Scripture Study grew rapidly, throughout the United States and into many other countries. Soon many scholars were writing materials for use by lay Catholics, and most Catholic publishers were producing a variety of materials to help make reading the Bible an essential part of Catholic life.

Today, in the twenty-first century, this vision of bringing Catholic Bible study to the masses continues to flourish. Little Rock Scripture Study

and other Bible study programs continue to grow worldwide. The revolutionary freshness of the Council reforms has worn off, but the church is in a new epoch. Our recent popes, John Paul II and Benedict XVI, have called our era a new springtime for the church, and they have urged us to undertake a new evangelization. Our bishops have called us to study our faith with new vigor and make adult faith formation a high priority. More than ever before, Catholic Bible study is essential for the ongoing renewal of our church.

Though studying the Bible still seems fairly new for many Catholics, in fact, the Bible has always been at the heart of the church. It is the family album of the people of God. As we look to the future, there is no better way for the church to be continually renewed than through the Sacred Scriptures. As more and more Catholics begin studying the Bible and putting it at the center of their lives of prayer, we will begin to find our way as a church in this new era. With catechesis and spirituality rooted in the Bible, we will understand ever more clearly the direction God wants us to take.

I am grateful for the people in my life who have taught me the Bible and who have been partners with me in the work of offering Bible materials to the people of God. I am grateful for the academic fellowship I enjoy with members of the Catholic Biblical Association of America. I am particularly thankful to the staff of Little Rock Scripture Study and its director, Cackie Upchurch, for inviting me to write this book. I am also thankful to Peter Dwyer and the team at Liturgical Press for their faithful partnership with the Diocese of Little Rock in the service of Catholic Bible Study and for directing the publication of this book. This ministry of God's word is the most rewarding life I could imagine, and I am so grateful that my life was caught up in the biblical renewal of the Catholic Church.

Whether you are a first-time reader of the Bible or have been studying Scripture for a while, you have picked up this book because you want to be a part of this rekindling of biblical fervor in the church. I want to encourage and assure you that putting the Bible at the heart of your life in Christ can indeed transform you. When you make reflective reading and study of the Bible a part of your daily life, you will notice changes within yourself that will deepen your spirituality and lead you in a direction you sincerely desire. As you reflect on this ancient, inspired literature of God's family, you will become ever more fully a child of God and enter more deeply into a personal relationship with Jesus the Lord. This book is only an invitation to that adventure of a lifetime. I pray that it will lead you to a renewed and committed life in Christ's church.



## CHAPTER ONE

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# *The Bible As God's Self-Revelation*

Our God is not a God who is concealed from us, obscurely hidden in eternity and unavailable. Our God is present to us, dynamically alive, communicating with creation, and entering into a relationship with humanity. God reveals the divine presence to us in many ways: through the beauty and wonders of creation, through the goodness of people, through quiet reflection and prayer, through the inner voice of our conscience, and through the many experiences of human life in the world.

We discern something of God's reality in each of these ways when we sense an ultimate meaning within our experiences and perceive the deeper reality behind life's events. When nature, friendship, love, struggle, contemplation, or joy leads us to understand a significance or purpose beyond the surface of things, we experience something of God's personal existence.

God has made his presence known in more specific ways in human history: liberating people from bondage, gathering them into a special community, guiding them to worship and practice justice, and offering them a life with meaning and hope. Above all, God has revealed the divine presence to humanity through the person and life of Jesus Christ. And God continues to reveal himself in Jesus' abiding presence, through the Holy Spirit alive in the church.

This self-revelation of God and people's response to it throughout history is called salvation history. God has been guiding creation through

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the centuries to experience the fullness of life, and God continues to reveal himself today. We are each a part of this ongoing history of salvation. God continually calls people to a deeper and fuller understanding of—and a more personal response to—this divine revelation.

The Second Vatican Council, in its document on Divine Revelation, expressed it this way:

By this revelation, then, the invisible God, from the fullness of his love, addresses men as his friends, and moves among them, in order to invite and receive them into his own company. (*Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, 2; can also be found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 142)<sup>1</sup>

The Bible is a primary and honored expression of this self-revelation of God. It is about how God shows the divine presence through words and deeds in history. The Bible shows us that God is not as interested in giving us information about himself as God desires to show himself to us personally. Because the Bible is a means of God's self-revelation to us, we can come to know God more fully through the words of the Bible.

### **God Entered into an Ongoing Covenant**

God discloses the divine presence to us in order to enter into a personal relationship with us. This relationship that God has entered with us is called the covenant. The whole Bible is the expression of this covenant, this ongoing relationship that God began with people centuries ago and continues now in our own lives. This covenant relationship is a two-way street: God reveals, and God's people respond.

God entered into covenant with the Hebrew people and disclosed his presence to them. God chose them by a free act of love to be his own people, and they responded with faith and love. Through the covenant God promised many blessings to his people, and they agreed to certain responsibilities that flow from that relationship. God first revealed this relationship to Abraham, promising countless descendants, a special land, and abundant blessings. Abraham's response changed his life and changed human history. Through Moses, God made the people of Israel his own people and revealed the terms of their relationship. The covenant was renewed many times throughout history through the kings and

<sup>1</sup> Recognizing that many Catholics do not have access to the documents of the Second Vatican Council, but do have the *Catechism* more readily at hand, I list both sources for the reader's convenience.

prophets of Israel. Finally, God entered into the fullest relationship possible with his people by sending his Son. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus ratified the new covenant, the completed and fullest relationship between God and humanity.

Since we can speak about God only in human words, using images and symbols rooted in our own experience, the Bible uses a variety of analogies to express this unique relationship. God is Father, and we are his children; God is the bridegroom, and we are his bride; God is the shepherd and we are the flock; God is the mother eagle caring for her young and teaching them to fly. You will find many more images of God and his relationship with us throughout the books of the Bible.

God first set his heart on the people of Israel and chose them to be his own simply because of love (Deut 7:6-8). They were neither powerful, numerous, nor virtuous as a people; they possessed no particular qualities that would draw God to them. God's choice of them was pure gift. Today, God's saving desire extends to all the people of the earth, but God actualizes this divine saving mission one person at a time. As people who have been baptized into Christ's church and called to study Sacred Scripture, we have been freely given the grace of sharing in God's life.

The Bible is the literature of the covenant, and it invites us to enter into the covenant ourselves. Through the Bible, not only do we learn about God's relationship with people of ancient times, but we become a part of that covenant. By entering into relationship with God, we become a part of this ongoing history of salvation, which gives meaning, purpose, and hope to our lives.

## **The Old Testament**

The Bible expresses God's desire to bring salvation to the entire world. In preparation for this, God chose to reveal himself to a particular people as the one, true, and living God. Through covenant, God gradually disclosed his promises to redeem and sanctify all of humanity. Israel learned of God's will for creation through their history as God's chosen people. Through the prophets, kings, and priests of Israel, God disclosed his saving will and merciful love.

The inspired writers of the Old Testament recounted and explained God's saving plan as it gradually unfolded. Their writings appear as the living word of God in the books of the Old Testament. The word "old" is a term of honor and respect for these ancient Scriptures. It does not at all mean that these books are obsolete or outdated. In fact, the covenant God made with Israel has not and cannot be annulled. As Paul wrote

about God's election of the Jewish people, "The gifts and the call of God are irrevocable" (Rom 11:29). The Old Testament writings retain a lasting value and are critically important for understanding God's saving work. As Paul continues, "Whatever was written previously was written for our instruction, that by endurance and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope" (Rom 15:4).

Sometimes Christians beginning to study the Bible place a lesser value on the Old Testament because they consider these books to be less significant than the New Testament books. But for Christians, both the Old Testament and the New Testament together express the inspired word of God. The Old Testament books are essential for understanding the history of salvation, and we cannot properly understand the New without understanding the Old. Only in the light of the Old Testament can the Christian comprehend the significance of the life, death, and glorification of Jesus.

## **The New Testament**

Through countless quotations and references, the New Testament writers bring the Old Testament into their Scriptures. Clearly these writers honor the Old Testament as the inspired word of God and demonstrate that those ancient texts attain and display their full meaning in the New Testament. God's saving plan, manifested in the Old, comes to fulfillment in the New. In this way, the whole Bible demonstrates the complete saving will of God for the world as it came to its fullness in Jesus Christ.

In the fifth century, St. Augustine expressed the church's belief in the unity of the whole Bible: "The New Testament lies hidden in the Old, and the Old becomes clear in the New." Since God is the inspirer and primary author of both testaments, they fit together in a wonderful unity of promise and fulfillment. In coming to appreciate the value of each part of God's word in Sacred Scripture, we can grow to understand God's total plan as it was gradually revealed through the history of Israel and Christ's church. From Genesis to Revelation, the biblical books reveal the single, overarching plan of God to share his life with the world.

"When the fullness of time had come" (Gal 4:4), God sent his Son among us as the culmination of his saving will. John's gospel expressed this climactic moment in the history of salvation with this magnificent verse:

And the Word became flesh  
and made his dwelling among us,  
and we saw his glory,

the glory of the Father's only Son,  
full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

Jesus established God's kingdom in the world, revealed God's unfathomable love through his death and resurrection, and promised his Spirit to establish his church to continue his saving work. The writings of the New Testament stand as God's inspired witness to these astonishing realities.

### **Roadblocks to Reading the Bible**

How can I ever hope to read such a huge book? How can I understand the Bible when even scholars can't understand it? How can I interpret the Bible when it is the cause of so much controversy and division? How can I understand the Bible that is written in such ancient language about events that happened so long ago? Why should I read the Bible when I seem to be getting along so well without it? These are the kinds of questions that people face when they consider the possibilities of studying the Bible. It is these kinds of uncertainties that sometimes prevent people from ever beginning to really read the Bible seriously. Let's try to respond to these major obstacles in order to understand the Bible better.

- *First, the Bible is not just one, overwhelmingly large book.* It is a small library of books. Every book of the Bible is different and unique. You do not need to read this library from beginning to end. By selecting from among the Bible's many different books and starting to read just one of them, the task becomes less overwhelming and even enjoyable.
- *Second, the Bible was never meant to be difficult.* It was written mostly by simple people, like fishermen, tentmakers, and shepherds. The biblical books were written about human experiences to show God's presence and guidance, and they were never intended to contain any mysterious language. The Bible expresses the faith of imperfect people very much like ourselves—people who believe that God cares about them and acts in their lives.
- *Third, the Bible was never intended to cause confusion and conflict between people.* Using the Bible to win arguments, prove our points, and show that others are wrong, is a serious abuse of the Bible. Approach these books with humility and wonder; they are the sacred literature of God's people.

- *Fourth, the Bible was written long ago, but that does not mean that we can't enter that ancient world and become a part of it.* There are many ways to bridge the gap between the ancient and modern world. We have translations today written in modern English. There are lots of tools, like maps, Bible dictionaries, and commentaries, that we can use to understand the ancient world better, thanks to modern scholarship.
- *Fifth, the Bible is not just an ancient book; it is also a contemporary book.* The basic needs and experiences of human beings who struggle and reach out to God are the same for all people in every time and place. The questions and struggles of our lives are the same as those of the people of the Bible, so the Bible responds to the realities of modern human existence.
- *Sixth, the Bible is the privileged place where we experience the communication of God to us.* If we seem to be getting along fine without reading the Bible, let's realize that the Scriptures can offer us so much more. Though God communicates with us in other ways, in the Bible we can be assured that we experience God's presence and truth calling us to a deeper encounter and understanding. St. Jerome said: "Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ." The Second Vatican Council spoke to the Church in our day when it proclaimed:

It follows that all the preaching of the Church, as indeed the entire Christian religion, should be nourished and ruled by sacred Scripture. In the sacred books the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet his children, and talks with them. And such is the force and power of the Word of God that it can serve the Church as her support and vigor, and the children of the Church as strength for their faith, food for the soul, and a pure and lasting fount of spiritual life. (*Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, 21; can also be partially found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 104)