

The New Collegeville Bible Commentary

THE NEW COLLEGEVILLE BIBLE COMMENTARY

SERIES EDITOR

Daniel Durken, O.S.B.



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Preface

A little more than fifty years after the close of the Second Vatican Council, with the publication of this one-volume edition of the *New Collegeville Bible Commentary*, Liturgical Press continues to respond to the call of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation that “access to sacred Scripture ought to be open wide to the Christian faithful” (*Dei Verbum* 22).

The *New Collegeville Bible Commentary* draws richly on the expanding field of scholars who are opening up the sacred Scriptures to ever-new generations of Catholics. Following the time-tested criteria of the Collegeville Commentary these scholars offer accessible and up-to-date interpretation of the Scripture for preachers, teachers, Bible study participants, and all readers of the Bible who seek a deeper understanding of what *Dei Verbum* so beautifully describes as “the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit” (9).

The *New Collegeville Bible Commentary* traces its form and purpose back to 1960 with the publication of the *Old and New Testament Reading Guides* by Liturgical Press. In the 1980s the original series was replaced with the *Collegeville Bible Commentary*, and for the first time the series was offered in both individual booklets and in collected Old and New Testament volumes. The first two editions have sold more than 2 million copies combined, amply demonstrating their effectiveness and appeal.

The third edition—the *New Collegeville Bible Commentary*—is now complete, and we are pleased to offer this one-volume edition. As the late Fr. Daniel Durken, O.S.B., editor of this third edition, said in concluding his preface to the New Testament volume in 2009: “May these commentaries, together with frequent reading of Scripture, inspire you and lead you to greater knowledge and love of Jesus Christ.”

Peter Dwyer
Director
Liturgical Press

ABBREVIATIONS

Books of the Bible

Acts—Acts of the Apostles
Amos—Amos
Bar—Baruch
1 Chr—1 Chronicles
2 Chr—2 Chronicles
Col—Colossians
1 Cor—1 Corinthians
2 Cor—2 Corinthians
Dan—Daniel
Deut—Deuteronomy
Eccl (or Qoh)—Ecclesiastes
Eph—Ephesians
Esth—Esther
Exod—Exodus
Ezek—Ezekiel
Ezra—Ezra
Gal—Galatians
Gen—Genesis
Hab—Habakkuk
Hag—Haggai
Heb—Hebrews
Hos—Hosea
Isa—Isaiah
Jas—James
Jdt—Judith
Jer—Jeremiah
Job—Job
Joel—Joel
John—John
1 John—1 John
2 John—2 John
3 John—3 John
Jonah—Jonah
Josh—Joshua
Jude—Jude
Judg—Judges
1 Kgs—1 Kings

2 Kgs—2 Kings
Lam—Lamentations
Lev—Leviticus
Luke—Luke
1 Macc—1 Maccabees
2 Macc—2 Maccabees
Mal—Malachi
Mark—Mark
Matt—Matthew
Mic—Micah
Nah—Nahum
Neh—Nehemiah
Num—Numbers
Obad—Obadiah
1 Pet—1 Peter
2 Pet—2 Peter
Phil—Philippians
Phlm—Philemon
Prov—Proverbs
Ps(s)—Psalms
Rev—Revelation
Rom—Romans
Ruth—Ruth
1 Sam—1 Samuel
2 Sam—2 Samuel
Sir—Sirach
Song—Song of Songs
1 Thess—1 Thessalonians
2 Thess—2 Thessalonians
1 Tim—1 Timothy
2 Tim—2 Timothy
Titus—Titus
Tob—Tobit
Wis—Wisdom
Zech—Zechariah
Zeph—Zephaniah

Other Abbreviations

Ant.—*Antiquities of the Jews*
Apoc. Bar.—Syriac Greek Apocalypse
of Baruch
H.E.—Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*

KJV—King James Version
LXX—Septuagint
NAB—New American Bible
T. Moses—*Testament of Moses*

INTRODUCTION TO THE BIBLE

Gregory W. Dawes

INTRODUCTION

The book we know as the Bible is not so much a single book as a library. It is a collection of books, written by different authors, at different times, and dealing with a wide range of concerns. We recognize this fact when we refer to the Bible as “the Scriptures,” a term that implies we are not dealing with one book but with many. Even our English word “Bible” was originally not a singular noun but a plural one, for it comes from the Greek term *ta biblia*, which means simply “the books.” Only very late in its history did the corresponding Latin word *biblia* come to be treated as a singular noun.

Imagine that you were to walk into your local public library and pick up a book entirely at random off the shelves. As you opened the book, there would be a number of questions that would immediately spring to mind. First of all, you might ask yourself, “What sort of book is this? Is it a ‘how-to’ book, such as a car repair manual, or a work on home decorating? Is it a work of fiction, such as a novel? Is it a history book, telling what purports to be a true story of a person or place? Or is it a textbook, setting out the fundamental ideas of some field of study?”

If you were not able to answer these questions, you would hardly know what to do with the book you were holding. What use would it be to you? How could you begin to understand it? As you continued turning the pages, other questions might occur to you. You might ask, for instance, “Who wrote this book? When was it written? For what purpose was it written? How is it set out? Does it, for example, tell a story with a beginning,

a middle, and an end?” These questions, too, would help you to understand the book better and to use it more intelligently.

Each volume in the New Collegeville Bible Commentary series will deal with one or more of the books that form the biblical library. In studying that book, it will ask precisely these questions. What sort of book is this? When was it written? By whom was it written and for what purpose? How does it organize its material and present its message? It is important to try to answer such questions if we are to read biblical books intelligently.

This volume, however, is intended as an introduction to the series as a whole. For this reason it is not devoted to any one of the biblical books; it is intended to be a guide to the library as a whole. What we will be looking at in the following pages is the history of this collection of writings and the ways in which it has been used. The questions we will be interested in are: Who founded this library? What books are found in it, and why were they selected? How has the collection developed over time? The following pages will also discuss how the library has been used over the long period of its history. What authority has been given to this particular collection of books and why? What instructions have been given for their interpretation during the long period that they have been regarded as Sacred Scripture?

In a word, this short work is intended to provide an initial orientation to the Bible for the general reader. It aims to help you read both the Bible itself and its commentaries with a sense of the

contexts out of which they have come. It will therefore discuss all the matters traditionally dealt with in an introduction to the Bible. To use some technical terms, which we will come across later, it will deal with issues of the biblical text, the biblical canon, biblical authority, and biblical criticism. But rather than discussing these matters in the abstract, it will do so in a broadly historical context. It will examine the origin of the biblical writings and the ongoing story of their interpretation by reference to wider changes in the Christian community and in the society to which it belongs.

The focus of this short book will be on the Christian churches and—in more recent times—the Catholic Church. But it is important to realize that the Christians are not the only people for whom the Bible is Sacred Scripture. The first part of the Bible, which Christians call the Old Testament, is also Jewish Scripture, read and studied in the synagogue in the same way as the Christian Bible is read and studied in the churches. The Jewish Bible, otherwise known as the Hebrew Bible, is often referred to simply as *Tanak*, a word made up of the initial letters of the Hebrew names of its three principal parts: the *Torah* (Law), the *Nevi'im* (the Prophets), and the *Ketuvim* (the Writings).

Insofar as it deals with the origins of the Old Testament books, the present volume will also be dealing with the origins of *Tanak*. To the extent that both Jews and Christians make reference to these writings, they share a common set of Scriptures. But when it comes to the interpretation of these writings, the two traditions part company. Jews and Christians read and understand these common Scriptures very differently. The present work will deal only with the history of Christian biblical interpretation; it will not try to deal with the Jewish. It would take another book to do justice to that topic, one written by an author with a more profound knowledge of Judaism. All I want to do here is to offer a warning. The attitudes towards the Bible described here are not the only attitudes that can be taken by people of faith. There is a parallel and very rich history of interpretation with which this introduction cannot deal.

In fact, there is a second history that this short work does not cover. This is the history of the use of the Bible outside the world of religious thought. It is the history of the Bible as a cultural artifact: its use by painters, musicians, poets, and playwrights and the role it has played in the develop-

ment of our thinking on a range of issues, from politics to psychology. This would be a fascinating field of study, for—whatever one thinks of the Bible's message—it would be hard to overestimate its cultural significance.

One could study, for instance, the changing ways in which painters and sculptors have depicted biblical scenes or the ways in which poets have used biblical themes to add resonance to their works. One could trace the influence of biblical patterns of thought on thinkers as apparently irreligious as Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). Sadly, however, I cannot deal with this topic either. In fact, no one person could hope to do it justice. A proper treatment of the Bible's cultural significance would require a whole team of authors with expertise in these different fields of study.

Finally, there is a third history of the Bible that the present study will not be able to discuss. This is the history of how the Bible has actually been used within the Christian community but at the grassroots level (as it were), outside the relatively rarified world occupied by bishops and theologians. A history of this sort would look at the use of the Bible by popular preachers, by teachers in classrooms, and by leaders of church discussion groups.

It would also examine the ways in which individuals have used the Bible, irrespective of what their teachers may have taught them. For instance, there exists a long-standing custom of solving personal dilemmas by opening the Bible at random and seeking an answer in whatever verse comes to hand. While widely condemned by church authorities and theologians, the practice continues to be used in our own time. In previous ages, biblical verses have also been used in charms and amulets, to ward off the power of evil in ways that many would regard as magical.

A history of such unofficial practices would be an extraordinarily interesting one, but it also falls outside the scope of the present work. What we are interested in here is what has been said about the Bible by its officially sanctioned interpreters and by those who have sought to influence them. It is a history of what we might call the institutional interpretation of the Bible within the Christian churches.

The present work falls naturally into two parts. The first will concentrate on the origins of the

Bible. It will offer a glimpse of the ways in which the people of Israel and then, in later centuries, the early Christians gathered this collection together and gave it the status of Sacred Scripture. This is the foundational section of the present study. After all, until there was an official collection of biblical writings, there was nothing for later Christians to interpret.

The second and larger part of our work will deal with the history of biblical interpretation. The survey found here will be divided into four periods. The first period is the longest, embracing both the age of those who are known as the church fathers and the Middle Ages. If we were to assign dates to this period, it would take us from about the year 200 to about the year 1500. Our second major period, that of the Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation, takes us from approximately the year 1500 to about 1650. This is a much shorter period, but it is one in which Western Christianity experienced revolutionary changes.

Our third period is the one I have described as the modern era. This may be said to begin with

the scientific revolution of the mid-seventeenth century and continue through to our own time. However, we cannot stop there. Recent decades have witnessed a series of revolutions in scholarly attitudes to the Bible. These developments may conveniently be dealt with in a fourth and final section, under the heading of postmodern approaches to biblical interpretation.

While this represents a very broad overview of a very complex history, it may offer the general reader a helpful framework within which to begin to understand the Bible. In particular, it should enable you to appreciate the variety of ways in which the Christian Scriptures can be interpreted. It will also highlight the fact that these methods of biblical interpretation are not timeless. They did not fall from heaven as a user's guide to a divinely inspired collection of books. They represent attempts by devout but limited human beings to make sense of a set of writings they believed to be God's word for their time. However much the Bible may be thought to embody an eternal truth, its interpreters remain fallible human beings, bound by the limitations of their time and place.

The Origins of the Bible

The question with which this first section of our study deals seems simple enough: Where have these writings come from? But in dealing with this topic we are faced with almost insurmountable difficulties. Biblical scholars have spent more than two hundred years trying to trace the origins of the biblical writings, and yet this remains one of the most hotly debated topics in contemporary religious scholarship.

To make the present task more manageable, I will begin by making a distinction. I will distinguish between the material found in the Bible and the Bible in its present form as a collection of works from different times and places. Some of the material found in the Bible is probably very ancient, but the task of tracing its origin is best left to the authors of the individual commentaries in this series. All I can do here is try to trace the origin of the Bible in its present form. The question I will be trying to answer is: Where has this particular collection of books come from? I will begin by discussing the way in which Jews and Christians gradually assembled their sacred writings. I will describe how these Scriptures have been transmitted to us before glancing briefly at some major biblical translations.

THE BIBLICAL CANON

We may begin with what is generally described as the formation of the biblical canon. The word “canon” is derived from a Greek word meaning a rod or a rule, in the sense of a rod of fixed length that could be used for measurement. When used metaphorically, the same word indicated a fixed standard, a norm against which other things could be judged. The word could be used, for instance, of the models artists used to ensure correct proportions or of the models grammarians used to indicate correct speech. When such models were set out in the form of a table, the table as a

whole could be described as a canon. At this point, the word had come to mean something like an authoritative series or list.

This is the sense in which Jews and Christians speak about the canon of the Bible. It is the list of biblical writings that is considered to carry authority within the synagogue and the churches. It is interesting to note that the word canon is today sometimes used in non-religious contexts. In literary studies, for instance, there have been some lively debates over the canon of English literature. The key question here has been: Which works should one include as worthy of study in a university course? More importantly, which works have traditionally been excluded, as unworthy of our attention, and why? Has the time come to incorporate previously marginalized voices—perhaps those of women or of African-American writers—into the canon?

Of course, similar questions can be asked of the Bible. There are, for instance, a number of early Christian gospels that the church came to regard as extra-canonical, that is, as not having authoritative status. (Such works are sometimes referred to as apocryphal works.) Often such works were excluded from the canon because they were thought to embody false teachings. Some of the non-canonical gospels, for instance, were connected with groups that are described today as Gnostic, a term that embraces a number of religious movements that flourished in the second century of the Christian era. These movements combined Christian beliefs with elaborate myths about the origin of the world in ways that made many of the church fathers deeply uneasy.

In recent decades, theologians have sometimes wanted to revisit these judgments. They have argued that such marginalized Christian groups may have something to tell us. In effect, this means questioning the limits of our present canon by suggesting that certain works should not have

been excluded. But it is not only theologians who sometimes question the limits of the canon; the same is true of historians. If historians are in search of the history of biblical Judaism and early Christianity, they will make use of canonical and non-canonical works alike. For instance, some contemporary writers on the “historical Jesus” will refer to the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas, believing that this work embodies historically reliable information.

Whatever one may think of the limits of the canon, the existence of a canon of Scripture is a historical fact. For better or for worse, the canon of Scripture constitutes the Bible as we know it. It is the formation of the biblical canon that is of interest here. When did this particular collection of books come to be formed? Who was involved in its formation? What books were included? What criteria were used in the selection of these particular writings?

Before we begin looking at the details of this process, the reader may wish to note a particular feature of biblical scholarship. Because such scholarship is engaged in by Jews and Christians alike, one often finds the religiously more inclusive abbreviations *B.C.E.*, “Before the Common Era,” and *C.E.*, “Common Era,” which are used in place of the more common *B.C.*, “Before Christ,” and *A.D.*, *Anno Domini*, “in the year of [our] Lord.” While these two sets of terms have different meanings, they divide history in exactly the same way. As a matter of consistency, the New Collegeville Bible Commentary uses *B.C.* and *A.D.*

THE FORMATION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT CANON

First of all, we should examine the collection of writings that Christians customarily call the Old Testament. It is difficult to be certain about the events that led to the formation of the Old Testament canon. Some Old Testament books may contain material that is much older than the books in the present form, reaching back into the early centuries of the first millennium *B.C.* The traditions that constitute these books probably first circulated by word of mouth, since the Old Testament seems to have its origins in an oral culture.

Other traditions may have existed in written form before being incorporated into the books we now have. Biblical scholars have spilled much ink

researching the formation of individual books and debating the date of the materials they contain. (For further information, the reader should consult the individual commentaries in this series.) But my concern here is not with the process by which individual books were formed; I am interested in the process by which these books were collected into an authoritative body of literature.

(a) The crisis of the Exile

A key event in this development seems to have been the Babylonian Exile, a series of tragedies that befell the Jewish people in Palestine in the sixth century *B.C.* On two occasions—first in the year 597 *B.C.* and then in the year 586 *B.C.*—the armies of the great empire of Babylon swept down from the north to destroy the Jewish kingdom in southern Palestine. This was not the first political catastrophe to be experienced by the Jewish inhabitants of the land. In the year 722 *B.C.* the armies of a previous Mesopotamian superpower, Assyria, had laid waste to the northern part of the Jewish-occupied land of Palestine. But according to the biblical history, the Jewish population of the North had long formed a separate kingdom, following a schism that had occurred in about the year 922 *B.C.*

At the time of the destruction of this Northern Kingdom the inhabitants of the Southern Kingdom, that of Judah, had escaped relatively unscathed. It seems from the account offered by the prophet Jeremiah (see, for instance, Jeremiah 7) that by the sixth century *B.C.* the inhabitants of Judah felt secure. They believed that the dynasty established by King David in Jerusalem enjoyed divine protection and that the Temple of God established in that city would never be destroyed.

The catastrophe of 586 *B.C.* put an end to this complacency. The Babylonians not only destroyed the city of Jerusalem and its temple and took a large part of the population of Judea into exile, but they also captured the ruling Jewish king and put his sons to death before his eyes prior to blinding him and taking him into exile as their prisoner. (One can read the biblical account of these events in 2 Kings 25.)

It would be difficult to overestimate the religious crisis brought on by these events. What had happened to God’s promises to Israel? What had become of the promise of the land of Israel, the promise that the descendants of David would rule

as kings in the city of Jerusalem? Israel's identity as a nation seemed to be in ruins. It fell to the prophets of that period, particularly the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel, to interpret the crisis and to give hope to the nation once again. The memory of their words helped to shape the Old Testament as we have it.

Of particular importance were the collected sayings of the prophet Jeremiah that seem to have been shaped by traditions now found in the book of Deuteronomy. According to the books of both Deuteronomy and Jeremiah, the promises of God were conditional. Their fulfillment was dependent on Israel's obedience to the Torah, the law given to Moses. On these grounds, the catastrophe of the Exile was explicable. It was not the case that God had abandoned Israel. On the contrary, Israel had abandoned God by failing to observe the law God had given. The defeat suffered at the hands of the Babylonians was a divine punishment. But it was not the last word. God may punish but would also restore, bringing Israel back to the land and rebuilding its temple. The book of Jeremiah could even speak of a "New Covenant," comparable to that originally made with Moses on Mt. Sinai (see Jeremiah 31).

The words of Jeremiah are important for many reasons. Not least among these is the fact that Christians would later claim to be the heirs of this New Covenant (or New Testament). The traditions found in Deuteronomy and Jeremiah are also of importance for the formation of the Old Testament canon, since it was this interpretation of the Exile that seems to have prompted one of the earliest attempts to compile and edit Israel's religious traditions. The traditions in question are those that make up our biblical books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. Many scholars believe that these books have been edited into a more or less unified story, often described as the "Deuteronomistic History," because of its similarity in spirit to the book of Deuteronomy.

The formation of this early collection of biblical materials remains a matter of scholarly conjecture. It is widely believed to have been completed toward the end of the years of exile, which lasted from 586 to about the year 538 B.C., when the Persian king Cyrus, the new ruler of the Mediterranean world, permitted the Jewish exiles to return to Palestine. We should probably not describe the compilation of the Deuteronomistic History as an

attempt to produce "Sacred Scripture"; we know too little about the circumstances of its origin and about the attitude of its editors. But the compilation and editing of these traditions represent an early attempt to make sense of Israel's history in the light of a firm faith in Israel's God. If this is correct, the formation of the Deuteronomistic History is an important step toward the Bible as we know it.

(b) The growth of the canon

Much of the history I have presented to this point is conjectural. While it seems well supported by the biblical writings themselves, the interpretation I have offered is still open to dispute. If we want clearer evidence of the formation of an Old Testament canon, we must look to the time of the Jewish scribe Ezra in the mid-fifth century B.C. As we have seen, the Deuteronomistic History was probably assembled in the final years of the Exile. During those years, or in the period immediately following the Exile, other parts of what was to become the biblical canon were also being collected. In particular, the book of Deuteronomy was soon linked to the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers to form what has come to be known as the "Pentateuch," the first five books of our present Bible. Within the Jewish world, these first five books are deemed particularly worthy of the title "Torah": the revealed law of God for Israel.

Ezra is remembered as a pious and learned Jewish leader who came from Babylon to the land of Palestine, perhaps about the year 458 B.C. Once in Palestine, he set about inaugurating a strict religious reform. As part of this reform (we are told in the book of Nehemiah) Ezra set up a wooden pulpit in the Water Gate Square in Jerusalem. From this pulpit he read aloud to the people from what seems to have been a set of Sacred Scriptures. These Scriptures are described as "the book of the law of Moses which the LORD prescribed for Israel" (Neh 8:1). As a result of Ezra's reading, the people repented of their sins and committed themselves afresh to keeping this law of God. What were these Sacred Scriptures that Ezra is reported to have read?

From the context it seems likely that what Ezra read were the first five books of our present Old Testament. There is much debate about the origin of these books—the books of Genesis, Exodus,

Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—each of which seems to have been gradually assembled from oral and written sources sometime before this date. This discussion need not concern us here. All I am interested in is the process by which they became a single unit.

The story of Ezra suggests that by the mid-fifth century B.C., the first five books of the Bible were already regarded as forming a collection that is thought to have divine authority. This collection does not just represent the law of Israel; it represents the law of God. If we assume that the books that form the Deuteronomistic history reached their present form in the previous century, and if we assume that the oracles or pronouncements of some of the prophets had also been preserved, then it seems that by the mid-fifth century a fair portion of the present Old Testament is already in existence.

This is certainly the case by the mid-second century B.C. The author of the preface to the book of Sirach, for instance, writing shortly after 132 B.C., can speak of “the law and the prophets and the other books of our fathers.” Given the later Jewish division of the Old Testament into three parts—the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings—it seems that by the mid-second century at least the first two of these parts were already assembled and were being studied as Sacred Scripture. The third category, described here as “the other books of our fathers,” is unclear; we cannot know for certain which books it contained.

By the time of the New Testament, the situation seems little changed. In a story found at the end of Luke’s Gospel, the risen Jesus appears to his disciples and explains to them the passages “in the law of Moses and in the prophets and psalms” that were about himself (Luke 24:44). Once again, the first two terms refer to what are now familiar parts of the Old Testament, but the precise composition of the third category seems unclear. It presumably includes a book of Psalms but probably embraces a wider range of writings.

It follows that by the time of the New Testament, the Old Testament canon as we know it was largely established, although its boundaries remained uncertain. (In Jewish circles it was not, of course, known as the Old Testament; this is a later, Christian title.) It is not entirely clear, for instance, which writings the New Testament authors would have considered to be Sacred Scripture. Their

Bible may have included a larger number of writings than those that form our present Old Testament. On the other hand, one or two of the books in our present Old Testament may not have been regarded as Sacred Scripture by the New Testament writers. (The rabbinic literature records Jewish debates, apparently from the late first century A.D., about the canonical status of both Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs.) At least one New Testament book (Jude 14–15) quotes from what would later be regarded as a non-canonical work (the book of Enoch) in the same manner as one would quote from Sacred Scripture. It seems that the process by which the canon was formed was not yet complete.

(c) Canonical and deuterocanonical books

These remarks highlight the difficulties that surround the question of what is called the closure of the Old Testament canon: the process by which these particular books, and these particular books alone, came to be regarded as having divine authority. With regard to the closure of the canon within Judaism, it used to be believed that the decision was made by an authoritative Council of Jewish teachers in the Palestinian town of Jamnia (or Yavneh) about the year 90 A.D. In more recent times scholars have questioned this tradition. However the decision was made, the end of the first century A.D. does seem to have marked a turning point within Judaism. After this date there seems to have been little significant disagreement about which books should be read as Sacred Scripture.

Among Christians, on the other hand, the limits of the Old Testament canon have remained a matter of debate. In particular, there exists a disagreement between the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches and those churches that emerged from the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation. What are rather misleadingly called “Protestant Bibles” contain thirty-nine Old Testament books, while what are sometimes called “Catholic Bibles” contain forty-six Old Testament books. (There are also small differences between the canon of the Orthodox churches and that of the Roman Catholic Church, but I will not deal with that matter here.)

The disputed books are often referred to by Protestants as the apocrypha, a term that originally

meant “hidden” (or perhaps “obscure”) books. Among Catholics these books are often referred to as deuterocanonical books, that is to say, books belonging to the second canon. Neither term is entirely satisfactory. The word “apocrypha” is often taken to imply that these books are somehow spurious, which is unfair. The term “deuterocanonical” is also inappropriate since—as we will see in a moment—there never was a second canon. Unfortunately, there is no alternative designation. In more recent Bibles, intended for use by Christians of different churches, the disputed books are sometimes included but are separated from the body of the text in an appendix or are placed between the Old and New Testaments.

How did this rather awkward situation come about? The decisive factor in this development was the existence within Judaism of a translation of the Old Testament into Greek. This translation is generally known as the Septuagint (the Latin term for “seventy,” abbreviated LXX), because it is said to have been produced in the third century B.C. by seventy (or seventy-two) translators. (We will come back to this story when discussing ancient translations.) Understandably this translation was widely used by Greek-speaking Jews outside of Palestine, whose knowledge of Hebrew was often minimal. When the New Testament writers, for instance, cite Sacred Scripture, they generally refer to the Septuagint Greek translation rather than the original Hebrew text.

The problem is that the Septuagint does not merely include the books of the Hebrew Bible as this was later defined. This collection of Jewish religious texts also includes other works, whether originally written in Hebrew or in Greek. It is easy to see how this broader collection could have been compiled. After all, the Septuagint was being formed at a time when the limits of what we call the Old Testament canon were still unclear. So there was no one authoritative canon to which the translators could refer. The Septuagint’s larger collection of books is sometimes known as the Alexandrian canon, after the city of its production (hence the term “deuterocanonical” meaning “belonging to the second canon”). But to speak of an Alexandrian canon is misleading, since it implies that the biblical canon was already fixed.

Within early Christianity the most common practice seems to have been to follow the larger collection found within the Septuagint. When

some local church councils in the fourth and fifth century, for instance, produced lists of Old Testament books, it was the larger collection that they cited. On the other hand, at least one early Christian writer disputed the value of the Septuagint. The writer in question was none other than the great biblical scholar St. Jerome (ca. 342–420). Jerome vigorously defended his translations from the Hebrew text against the suggestion of St. Augustine (354–430) that he rest content with the Septuagint.

As far as the canon was concerned, Jerome’s preference seems to have been for the smaller, Hebrew collection. In any case, this collection was the unambiguous choice of the Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century. Their decision may well have been motivated by theological concerns. The deuterocanonical books of Maccabees, for instance, encourage prayer for the dead, which could lend support to the Catholic doctrine of purgatory. It was also motivated by the same desire that motivated St. Jerome: a desire to return to the original languages of the Bible and to interpret the biblical text afresh. By way of reaction to the Reformers, the Catholic Church reiterated its traditional preference for the larger collection, defining this collection as canonical in 1546 during the Council of Trent.

THE FORMATION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON

While the origins of the Old Testament canon are sometimes difficult to discern, we know more about the formation of the New Testament. As was the case with the formation of the Old Testament, this was a gradual process that took place over several hundred years. In a way that seems remarkable to us, it appears that the decision about the New Testament canon was not made by any one authority. Nor does there seem to have been any one moment at which one could speak of an agreement being reached. As we will see, various church fathers and various local councils did draw up lists of canonical New Testament books. In the end the matter seems to have been decided by a process of lively debate and gradually emerging consensus among the local Christian churches. In the following pages I will try to trace this process by looking at some of its significant moments.

Fig.1: The Canon of the Old Testament

The books of the Old Testament are listed here in the order of the Hebrew (Jewish) canon, with the addition of the deuterocanonical works which are accepted as canonical by Catholics.

Pentateuch (*Torah*)

- Genesis
- Exodus
- Leviticus
- Numbers
- Deuteronomy

The Prophets (*Nevi'im*)

- Joshua
 - Judges
 - 1–2 Samuel
 - 1–2 Kings
- } also known as the “Former Prophets” or (in modern times) the “Deuteronomistic History”

- Isaiah
- Jeremiah
- Ezekiel

- | | | | |
|---------|----------|-----------|---|
| Hosea | Jonah | Zephaniah | } sometimes known as the twelve
“Minor Prophets” |
| Joel | Micah | Haggai | |
| Amos | Nahum | Zechariah | |
| Obadiah | Habakkuk | Malachi | |
| | | | |

The Writings (*Ketuvim*)

- | | | |
|----------|-------------------------|----------------|
| Psalms | Lamentations | Daniel |
| Job | Esther | Ezra |
| Proverbs | Song of Songs | Nehemiah |
| Ruth | Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes) | 1–2 Chronicles |

The Deuterocanonical Works (also called the Apocrypha)

- | | |
|--------|-------------------------|
| Judith | 1–2 Maccabees |
| Tobit | Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) |
| Baruch | Wisdom of Solomon |

(a) The Old Testament as Christian Scripture

As was the case with the Old Testament Scriptures, the writings of the New Testament seem to have emerged from a lively oral culture. The focus of early Christian faith was not a set of writings. It was a proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus and of its significance for human beings. In addition to this central proclamation, individual sayings of Jesus seem to have been preserved and handed on, particularly for use in moral exhortation. If the earliest Christians required biblical support for their message, then

they found plenty of support in their Jewish Scriptures, for—even if the limits of the Old Testament canon were not yet fixed—Judaism already had its Sacred Scriptures. The Law and the Prophets along with a number of other writings were regarded as the word of God.

It was true that the followers of Jesus sometimes had to employ new styles of interpretation in order to uncover the Christian meaning of these Jewish Scriptures (see, for instance, Gal 4:21-31). The earliest Christians were in no doubt that their message about Christ could be found in what we call the Old Testament, even if it was sometimes

hidden beneath the surface (as it were) of the biblical text. Christianity was therefore never without a set of Sacred Scriptures. Just as it began its life as a movement within Judaism, so its earliest Scriptures were those that it shared with the larger Jewish community.

Even when early Christians began composing written accounts of their faith, they probably did not think they were writing a new set of Sacred Scriptures. Christianity already had its Bible, namely the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament). When Christians recorded their message about Jesus in writing, they did so at different times and for all kinds of immediate, practical purposes. The letters of St. Paul, for instance, are clearly occasional literature, written for particular individuals and communities to fulfill particular needs.

There were two set of events, however, that may have encouraged the writing down of the earliest Christian proclamation. The first was the death of the apostolic generation, the eye-witnesses to the events of Jesus' life. As those who had known Jesus after the flesh passed away, it must have seemed vital to record their testimony for future generations. The second key event was probably the destruction of the city of Jerusalem by the Romans in the year 70. This catastrophe not only hastened the break between the Christian community and Judaism but also involved the dispersal of the Christian church in Jerusalem, which had been an important center of evangelism. This event may also have encouraged Christians to record their beliefs in writings and to collect those writings into a single body of Scripture.

(b) Stages in the development of a canon

The first New Testament works to be collected were apparently the letters of the apostle Paul. Ignatius of Antioch, shortly before his martyrdom in about the year 107, wrote to the Christians of Ephesus in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). In this letter he noted that "the saintly Paul" mentioned them "in every one of his letters." This suggests that Paul's letters were known to him not just as individual letters but also as a collection. Within the New Testament itself, the second letter of Peter (2 Pet 3:15-16) speaks of the wisdom of Paul found "in all his letters," a wisdom "that the ignorant and unstable distort to their own destruction, just as they do the other scriptures."

It is very hard to date Second Peter, which may also come from the beginning of the second century. In any case, it provides further evidence that there existed a collection of Paul's letters at a relatively early date. It even suggests that these letters are being treated as somehow authoritative, comparable to "the other scriptures."

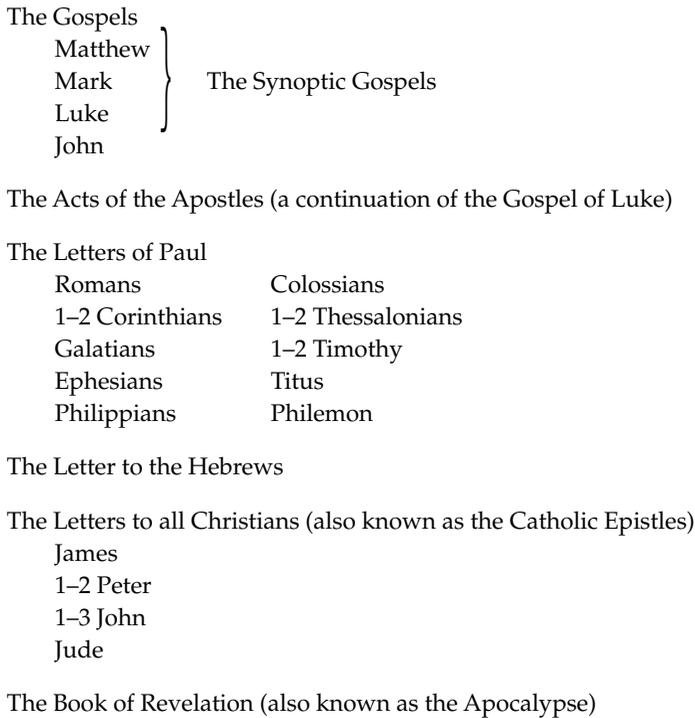
Polycarp of Smyrna, who died about the year 155, is another witness to this development. In his letter to the Christians of Philippi he encourages them to pay close attention to the letters that the apostle Paul wrote after he had spent time among them. Once again, at least some of Paul's letters were clearly in circulation, although it is impossible to tell how many or which ones.

As far as the gospels are concerned, we find individual sayings of Jesus cited in early Christian writers. Our earliest witness to this fact is Clement of Rome, whose first letter to the church in Corinth probably dates from the 90s of the first century. Only a few years later Ignatius of Antioch also quotes some words of Jesus. In neither case, however, can we be confident that these writers had access to written gospels, let alone to a collection of gospels. Writing some decades into the second century, Polycarp of Smyrna makes reference to a passage from the Gospel of Matthew in a way that does suggest he had a written text. Once again we do not know whether he had access to more than one account of Jesus' life.

Clearer evidence for the existence of a collection of gospels can be found in the writings of Justin Martyr, who died about the year 165. Justin speaks of the "memoirs of the apostles or of those who followed them," and it seems from the extracts he gives that he is speaking of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. (These three gospels are often referred to as the "Synoptic Gospels" because of their close relationship with one another.) Justin's work also tells us that these gospels were being read during the Sunday liturgy.

Finally, if we are looking for evidence of our present set of four gospels, we may find it in the story of the early Christian scholar Tatian, who died about 160. Tatian is said to have produced a harmonized version of the accounts of Jesus' life in a work entitled the *Diatesseron*. The name of the work, which may be literally translated "by means of the four," suggests that he had access to four gospels, presumably the same four as we have today. The fact that he could take such liber-

Fig. 2: The Canon of the New Testament



ties with their text is also revealing: it suggests that these four gospels had not yet achieved a fixed status as Sacred Scripture.

The formation of a closed New Testament canon with authoritative status was encouraged by the work of Marcion, who also died about the year 160. Marcion was an early Christian thinker who believed there was a radical opposition between the God of the Old Testament and that of the New Testament. This belief led him to a thoroughgoing revision of the existing Christian Scriptures, which were purged of all elements that referred to the Old Testament. Needless to say, not much was left. From the existing gospels, for example, Marcion accepted only a highly edited version of the Gospel of Luke. The church as a whole rejected Marcion's position, but in doing so it was forced to name certain writings as authoritative.

A key figure here seems to have been Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. 130–200), who insisted that our four gospels, and only our four gospels, should be accepted as reliable and authoritative. Although there continued to be some debate regarding the

Gospel of Luke, probably because of its use by Marcion, Irenaeus' position soon became widely accepted. It seems, therefore, that by the end of the second century there existed a fixed and authoritative collection of four gospels.

As far as the canonical status of the other books of the New Testament is concerned, there continued to be some debate through to the end of the fourth century. Between the end of the second century and the end of the fourth century we find two contrary tendencies. On the one hand, a few of the books that were eventually accepted into the canon continued to be regarded with suspicion. Particularly debated were the letter to the Hebrews and the book of Revelation. On the other hand, some early Christian writings that were eventually rejected from the canon were still competing for acceptance. For instance, the Christians of this period showed a particular fondness for an early second-century work known as the letter of Barnabas.

This state of uncertainty is reflected in the writer Origen, who in about the year 253 can speak of three categories of writings. The first

category is that of “undisputed” books, whose authority all Christians accepted. The second is that of “doubtful” books, whose status was undecided. The third is that of what he calls “false” books, whose claim was to be rejected. A similar threefold classification can be found in the work of the church historian Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 260–340). A key figure in bringing these controversies to an end seems to have been the theologian and church father Athanasius of Alexandria. In a letter dating from Easter 397, Athanasius set out our current list of twenty-seven books and insisted that only these were to be accepted as authoritative. This position was soon accepted by all the churches.

TEXTS AND TRANSLATIONS

(a) The transmission of the biblical text

It is one thing to have established a collection of canonical writings; it is quite another to transmit those writings unchanged from one generation to another. Before the European invention of printing in the mid-fifteenth century, biblical manuscripts had to be painstakingly copied by hand, either onto papyrus (a material similar to paper but made from the reed-like papyrus plant) or onto vellum (specially prepared calfskin). While medieval scribes developed remarkably efficient methods of copying, the process was still liable to error and produced works that were expensive for a reader to purchase.

As far as writing materials are concerned, in the Old Testament period the typical form was the scroll, which continues to be used for liturgical purposes within Judaism today. However, a scroll is not a very convenient object for a reader to consult. It requires two hands—one to hold the scroll while the other hand unfurls it—and it must be rewound after use in preparation for the next reader. A scroll can also be very long, so that in this respect too it is an unwieldy artifact. For instance, the sixty-six chapters of Isaiah require a scroll more than twenty-one feet (about seven meters) in length. This meant that it was all but impossible for the entire Old Testament to be recorded on one scroll. Very often separate scrolls were used for individual books.

This process was revolutionized by the invention of the *codex*, probably late in the first century

of the Christian era. The codex consists of individual pages bound together into something resembling our modern book. Indeed the development of the codex seems to have been pioneered by Christians out of their desire to preserve and consult their sacred writings.

If biblical texts were copied by hand and if this process was of necessity subject to error, then how can we be sure that our Bibles are accurate copies of the original documents? The short answer to this question is that we cannot. Despite some extraordinary discoveries in recent times, we do not have a Hebrew manuscript of the entire Old Testament that is older than the tenth century A.D. We do, however, have ancient manuscripts of the entire Greek New Testament, some of which take us back to the fourth century A.D. We also have ancient manuscripts of individual biblical books, both of the Old and New Testaments, as well as many papyrus and vellum fragments. These provide a rich resource for the student of the biblical text. The Bible is certainly no worse off in this respect than any other ancient work. Indeed we have a much richer supply of manuscript evidence for the Bible than we have for the classical authors of Greece and Rome.

Nonetheless, the task of piecing together a reliable text—a task known as textual criticism—remains a difficult one in which capable scholars can reasonably adopt different positions. It is also a highly specialized task, requiring detailed knowledge of the individual manuscripts, their relationship to one another, and the history of their transmission. Where uncertainties remain, our modern biblical translations will frequently contain footnotes that indicate that at this point different manuscripts have different texts. These footnotes typically have the form: “some witnesses read . . .,” or perhaps “other ancient authorities read . . .,” with the variant text following. A quick glance at such footnotes will show the reader how minor such variant “readings” (as they are known) generally are.

Of particular significance for textual critics has been the discovery, beginning in 1947, of a series of ancient manuscripts by the shore of the Dead Sea near an ancient settlement known today as Khirbet Qumran. This discovery has been an important one for a number of reasons. For instance, these “Dead Sea Scrolls” have shown us how diverse Judaism was around the beginning of the

Christian era. While making no direct reference to the Christian movement, the Scrolls have shed light on the world in which that movement developed.

What is worth noting here, however, is that the Qumran scrolls include much biblical material. In particular, they include both a complete copy of the book of Isaiah and fragments of all the other Old Testament books (i.e., the books of the Hebrew canon), except that of Esther. These texts and fragments are all much older than any previously extant manuscripts. While these discoveries have provided new evidence for textual critics to use, they have also demonstrated how reliable the traditional Hebrew text was. This traditional text, known as the Masoretic text (after the Masoretes, the Jewish scholars of the sixth to ninth centuries A.D. who edited it), remains the basis of our present-day editions and translations.

(b) Ancient translations

The books of our Christian Bible were originally written in three different languages. Most of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew, although small sections were written in a language that is a close relative of Hebrew, namely, Aramaic. While Jesus himself apparently spoke Aramaic, the whole of the New Testament was written in the common language of the Mediterranean world, namely, Greek. It follows that for most readers who have little or no knowledge of the biblical languages, access to the Bible will be through translations. (For serious study, of course, access to the original languages is indispensable.) For this reason the student will find it helpful to know something about some of the better known biblical translations.

The best known ancient translation of the Bible has already been mentioned. It is the Greek translation of the Old Testament that is known as the Septuagint (LXX). While the Septuagint was in all likelihood produced by a number of translators over several centuries, the traditional story of its origin highlights the authority it had within the Greek-speaking Jewish world. The story is found in a work known as the Letter of Aristeas, which probably dates from about the second century B.C. According to this source, a certain King Ptolemy (probably Ptolemy II Philadelphus [285–247 B.C.]) wished to have copies of all the books of the world. He therefore commissioned a translation

of the Jewish Scriptures by sending a letter to the High Priest in Jerusalem. The High Priest sent the King seventy-two translators (six from each of the twelve tribes), who completed the work of translation in precisely seventy-two days.

Modern scholars consider the Letter of Aristeas to have all the marks of legend, and the real history of the Septuagint is much debated. While its oldest sections may well have been produced by the Jews of Alexandria in the third century B.C., as Jewish tradition suggest, it does seem to have undergone a series of later revisions. In any case, the Septuagint was an important work for Greek-speaking Jews for several hundred years. It fell out of favor among Jewish scholars only after the first century A.D., possibly because of its widespread adoption by Christians. But the Septuagint remained important within the Christian world, being the preferred biblical text not only of the New Testament writers but also of many of the church fathers. St. Augustine, for instance, believed that its translation was divinely inspired. To this day, the Septuagint continues to be a widely used translation of the Bible among Greek-speaking Orthodox Christians.

The second ancient translation worthy of mention is that known as the Vulgate, a name that suggests that this was an *editio vulgata*, or “common edition,” of the biblical text. The Vulgate is a translation of the Bible into Latin, traditionally attributed to the early Christian scholar and ascetic, St. Jerome. Concerned by the lack of agreement among the existing Old Latin versions, Pope Damasus (ca. 304–384) commissioned Jerome, the leading biblical scholar of his age, to undertake a new Latin translation. While Jerome began his translation, as was customary at that time, from the Septuagint, he soon became aware of its deficiencies. This led him to undertake a more thorough translation, this time from the Hebrew text whose authority he vigorously defended. This new Latin version appeared between the years 390 and 405.

The Vulgate as we have it today, however, is not identical to the text produced by St. Jerome. Indeed our present Vulgate seems to be a composite work: some coming from Jerome, some representing surviving Old Latin translations, and some freshly revised after Jerome’s time. Its importance lies in the fact that it remained the most influential version of the Bible throughout the

Middle Ages. After a decree of the Council of Trent in 1546, the Vulgate became the official Latin Bible of the Catholic Church, being published in an official edition in 1592. For this reason, most Catholic translations of the Bible in the modern period were made from the Vulgate. This remained the case right up until 1943 when translations from the original languages were officially sanctioned. A revised edition of the Vulgate was published by Pope John Paul II in 1979 under the title *Nova Vulgata* (New Vulgate).

(c) Modern translations

No attempt can be made here to cover the diversity of modern translations of the Bible that today cover more than 350 of the world's languages. But it may be worth mentioning the most famous early English translations, both Protestant and Catholic.

The first complete translation of the Bible into English was made from the Latin Vulgate by John Wycliffe and his supporters, between 1382 and 1384. Wycliffe's translation became the common English Bible of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The earliest printed biblical translations in English were those of William Tyndale, his New Testament first appearing in 1525. Tyndale later published some parts of the Old Testament, but he died as a Protestant martyr in 1536 before his translation could be completed. Tyndale's translation is noteworthy not only for its lively English, which left its imprint on later translations, but also because he worked from the original languages.

Because Tyndale's translation was never completed, the honor of being the first complete printed English Bible falls to the translation of Miles Coverdale, published in 1535. But the most famous English Bible ever produced is undoubtedly the Authorized Version, commonly known as the King James Version, of 1611. This edition became so popular that among many Protestant Christians it achieved almost canonical status in its own right. The King James tradition was continued in the Revised Version of 1881 and 1885, the Revised Standard Version of 1946 and 1952, and the New Revised Standard Version of 1989.

Some of these early editions of the Bible in English were regarded by Catholics with suspicion. Generally speaking, this was not so much because of their translations as because of the notes that

often accompanied them, notes that continued the Protestant Reformers' attacks on the Catholic Church. Catholics therefore undertook their own translations of the Bible into English. Up until the mid-twentieth century, these translations were generally based on the text of the Latin Vulgate. Noteworthy among these was the Douay-Rheims version, the New Testament of which was published in 1582 and the Old Testament in 1609. The language of this translation was somewhat improved by a revision undertaken between 1749 and 1763 by Bishop Richard Challoner of London.

More recent Catholic translations from the original languages include the New American Bible of 1952 and 1970 (the New Testament of which was extensively revised in 1987), a translation entitled the Jerusalem Bible (published in 1966 but originally produced in French), and the significantly revised New Jerusalem Bible (published in 1985). In more recent times the cooperation of Protestant and Catholic scholars in the work of biblical translation, as well as the inclusion of the deuterocanonical books in most scholarly editions, seems to be bringing an end to the age of separate, confessional biblical texts.

With regard to contemporary biblical translations, it may be useful to make some comment on the philosophies that underlie the different versions. An attentive reader of Bible translations will soon realize that they may be located on a spectrum. At the one end of the spectrum are those translations that attempt, as much as possible, to render one Greek or Hebrew word with a corresponding English word. Of course, a completely word-for-word rendering would produce a terribly stilted style of English. Indeed it would border on the unintelligible. But some translations do try to keep as close as possible to this ideal. Some of the early English translations seem to have followed this principle. The King James Version, for instance, even printed in italic type words added by its translators that do not correspond to words in the Greek or Hebrew text.

At the other end of the spectrum are those translations that attempt to discover the sense of a Greek or Hebrew phrase and then to reproduce this meaning freely in English. The correspondence aimed at here is not that of words, but that of meaning. If that meaning is thought to be best conveyed by an entirely idiomatic English phrase, then that phrase will be chosen even if it is far

removed from the manner of speech adopted by the biblical writers. Both types of translation undoubtedly have their use, but the reader who wishes to undertake a close study of the biblical text will normally choose the former.

(d) Division into chapters and verses

It may also be helpful to comment on the division of our Bibles into chapters and verses. The Old Testament was already divided into sections in ancient times; such divisions may even be found among the manuscripts at Qumran. But these divisions of the text do not correspond to our modern chapters. Generally speaking, they marked off sections of text for weekly study, a practice that continued within Judaism. Similarly, the oldest Greek manuscripts of the New Testament are also provided with chapter divisions. But these, too, do not correspond to our modern chapters. It was only in the thirteenth century that the entire Bible came to be divided into chapters. This development occurred at the University of Paris in the course of developing a standard biblical text. The chapter divisions were then carried

over into the Hebrew manuscripts in the fourteenth century.

As far as verse divisions are concerned, ancient Hebrew manuscripts did sometimes contain numbered verses. But the verses were not numbered by chapter as is our practice today. The present verse numbering of the Old Testament dates only from some printed editions of 1563 and 1571. The verse numbering of the New Testament is of a similar date. It is first found in the fourth edition of the Greek New Testament printed in 1551 by the Parisian publisher Robert Estienne (also known by his Latin name Stephanus). Indeed Stephanus is said to have divided the New Testament into verses while on a journey between Lyons and Paris.

These remarks indicate that the present chapter and verse divisions of our Bible were imposed upon the text at a relatively late date. While they are convenient, they have no particular authority and can sometimes be misleading. For this reason they should not be regarded as a guide to the interpretation of the text. The careful student of the Bible would be well advised simply to ignore them.

The Interpretation of the Bible

THE TASK OF INTERPRETATION

We are about to study the history of biblical interpretation. A devout reader may find this strange and may ask why it should be considered important. Why devote so much time to studying how the Bible has been understood? If the Bible is the word of God, then surely its message is the same in every age. There should be no need to speak about its “interpretation.” If the Bible is the word of God, surely we should be able simply to pick it up and understand it. All this talk about interpretation—is it not merely complicating what is at heart a simple matter of faith?

Faced with the bewildering variety of biblical interpretations, one can understand this objection. However, it is fundamentally mistaken. For better or for worse, there is no such thing as a simple reading of the Bible. The Bible is always interpreted, even when it is read by an unsophisticated reader who would never think of being an interpreter. If we do pick up the Bible and understand it immediately, without any conscious reflection on its meaning, it is not because we are failing to interpret. It is because the act of interpretation is spontaneous: it happens so quickly that we fail to realize it has occurred. There is no reading of the Bible without interpretation, even if that interpretation is performed in an entirely unself-conscious manner.

While this idea may be surprising to many who think of themselves as “simple believers,” it should not be a cause for alarm. Even if one believes that the Bible is God’s word, it remains true that this divine word has been revealed in human words. The Second Vatican Council embraced this idea in its statement on divine revelation (*Dei Verbum*) where it insisted that “God speaks to men and women in sacred Scripture in human fashion.”

Indeed the Council went further, writing that there is a certain parallel between the humanity

of Sacred Scripture and the doctrine of the incarnation. Just as the eternal Word of God took upon himself the weakness of human nature, so in Scripture the words of God are expressed in human language. While the Bible may be God’s word, it is also an artifact, a product of human culture.

Not only is the Bible a human artifact, as a written work it is also a collection of signs. For this reason it requires interpretation. A sign by definition is something that refers beyond itself. It has a double existence. First of all, it is a physical object (in this case, marks on a page) that can be seen, touched, tasted, heard, or smelled. But as a sign it points beyond the impression it makes on our senses: it acts as a bearer of meaning. When someone speaks to us, a sound is uttered that can be analyzed as a pattern of wave-like disturbances in the air. But that is not normally what we think of when we are addressed. What we think of are those realities to which the speaker’s words refer. Similarly, when we look at a painting, it is not normally to admire the texture of the canvas on which it is painted. It is to appreciate the impression the painting is meant to convey. The sound of the speech and the paint on the canvas are physical realities that the physicist or chemist could describe. But they are much more than that. As products of human culture, they refer beyond themselves to other realities that they in some sense represent.

We may illustrate this fact by a famous example, first given by the English philosopher Gilbert Ryle. When we see someone rapidly close and open an eyelid, we must immediately decide whether this was a mere twitch—an involuntary act, perhaps in response to a floating grain of dust—or a deliberate act. If it was an involuntary act, then it can be described scientifically as a physiological reaction. In this case it remains simply a physical act, although it may have been triggered by a number of events. There is nothing

more that needs to be said about it. But if it was a deliberate act, then it becomes a gesture, a wink, a small but significant artifact of human culture. As such it carries a meaning.

The problem is that it is not immediately clear what meaning it carries. This will depend very much on the situation in which it was performed. Was it a friendly gesture, directed to ourselves, intended to establish a rapport? Was it not only a friendly gesture but a sexually loaded gesture, an invitation to greater intimacy? Or was it an ironical gesture, a warning that there is something in the present situation that is not quite what it appears? On the other hand, perhaps the wink was not directed to us at all. Perhaps it was directed to someone else. If so, it may have been a signal, an indication that the other person should initiate some course of activity, one perhaps detrimental to us. Even so simple a gesture as a wink is deeply ambiguous. It requires interpretation.

Gilbert Ryle points out how complex this process can become. Suppose that the person winking is merely imitating another person. Suppose that the gesture is really a parody of someone who is prone to giving significant winks. It might be performed behind someone's back as a way of causing amusement to the onlookers. In this case, the wink takes on a new level of meaning that the interpreter will have to take into account. Suppose, once again, that the gesture is being performed by someone alone, in front of a mirror. He may, perhaps, be intending to practice his parody of someone's habit of winking so as to amuse his friends later on. In this case, there is a third level of meaning. Someone wanting to interpret the act of winking, to say what it means in this context, would have to take all three levels of meaning into account.

Unfortunately the task of interpretation is still more complex in the case of a written work. In the examples just given, the winker and the observer have at least one situation in common, namely, that in which the wink is being performed. In this situation the significance of the wink may appear obvious to the observer. It is understood immediately, without any apparent need for interpretation. (Once again, however, this does not mean that the gesture is not being interpreted. It means only that the act of interpretation is very rapid,

perhaps automatic.) But when it comes to the interpretation of a written work, the situation may be very different. Such a work endures even after the death of its author and the loss of the context in which it was written.

The prophet Isaiah may be dead, but we have his words collected in the biblical book that bears his name. In this case the writer and the interpreter are far removed from one another in time. The prophet Isaiah's words may make reference to realities in the situation in which he was living. He will refer, for instance, to reigning Israelite monarchs and to the political situation in which his nation found itself. To understand what this text meant when it was written, the interpreter will have to reconstruct the context in which it was written, the situation in which it first served as an act of communication. As we will see shortly, it was a new awareness of the distance between the author and the interpreter of biblical texts that contributed to the rise of a self-consciously historical approach to biblical interpretation in the seventeenth century.

Discussions of these matters generally go under the heading of the term "hermeneutics," from the Greek verb meaning "to interpret." Hermeneutics, that is, the theory of interpretation, should be distinguished from exegesis, which refers to the very act of interpreting particular texts themselves. (The word "exegesis" comes from a Greek phrase meaning "to draw out," in the sense that one "draws meaning out" of a text.) Neither term is limited to discussions of biblical interpretation; they can be used with regard to the interpretation of any body of literature. Hermeneutical discussions can become very complex as we will see later when we consider what are sometimes called postmodern approaches to biblical interpretation.

For the moment I wish only to indicate that there is no reading of the Bible without some kind of interpretation. Indeed to read a translation of the Bible is to take for granted other peoples' interpretations, for at many points their translations will be based on interpretive decisions. For this reason alone it is important to appreciate the many and various ways in which the Bible has been interpreted throughout Christian history. It is to this task that we must now turn.

Patristic and Medieval Interpretation

(ca. 200–1500)

Having looked briefly at the origins of our Bible, it is time to begin our survey of the history of its interpretation. That survey begins with a very long stretch of history, one that embraces what is customarily described as the age of the church fathers (the patristic age: ca. 200–750 A.D.) and the medieval period (ca. 750–1500). In most fields of study it would be foolhardy to try to discuss so long a period, which embraces so many changes in European society and thought. In the late medieval period, for instance, the focus of European cultural life shifted from the countryside with its villages and monasteries, to the newly emerging cities with their commerce and their universities. This social change went hand-in-hand with an intellectual Renaissance that involved the rediscovery of many philosophical and scientific texts from the ancient world. This in turn prepared the way for the cultural Renaissance of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that contained the seeds of both the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century and the scientific revolution of the seventeenth.

PRINCIPLES OF PATRISTIC AND MEDIEVAL INTERPRETATION

All of these changes are important, and I will return to them shortly for they have their impact on biblical interpretation. When it comes to the understanding of the Bible, however, this long period of history has a certain unity, for virtually all Christian interpreters throughout these centuries accepted a basic set of assumptions. These are all the more important because they are assumptions that later centuries were to call into question. The first assumption was that of a harmony between the message of the Old Testament and that of the New Testament. The second was that of a harmony between the message of the Bible and

that of the church. The third assumption was that of a harmony between sacred and secular knowledge. The first two of these assumptions require little explanation and will be discussed only briefly. The third will require a slightly more extended treatment.

(a) Old and New Testaments

With regard to the harmony of the Old and the New Testaments, patristic and medieval thought was dominated by the idea of the divine inspiration of the Bible. The Bible may have had a diversity of human authors. These authors may have lived at different times and written for different audiences using a variety of literary genres. Its authors may have been Jewish rather than Christian. But insofar as patristic and medieval thinkers recognized these facts at all, they regarded them as insignificant when set alongside the divine inspiration of Scripture. The Bible may have a number of human authors, but it had one divine author whose voice could be heard throughout.

This meant that Scripture could contain messages about which its human authors were only dimly aware. For instance, the author of Isaiah 7:14 (“ . . . the virgin shall be with child, and bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel”) may have lived in the eighth century B.C. In the normal course of affairs, one would not expect an author of that date to know about the birth of Jesus occurring some seven hundred years later. But this expectation has no force when it comes to a work inspired by God. Even if Isaiah did not know about the birth of Jesus, God surely did.

Those who believed in the divine authorship of Scripture could quite naturally take this verse as a reference to Jesus. It was not just isolated verses that were interpreted in this way: the patristic and medieval interpretation of the Old Testament was

thoroughly Christocentric (“Christ-centered”). If Jesus was indeed the eternal Word of God made flesh (John 1:14), then one would expect the entire Scripture to speak of him even if only in veiled and mysterious ways. As we will see, this assumption was to endure until the rise of historical criticism in the seventeenth century with its all-but-exclusive focus on the human authors of Scripture.

(b) Bible and church

With regard to the harmony between the message of the Bible and that of the church, patristic and medieval Christians did not just believe in the divine inspiration of Scripture; they also believed in the divine establishment of the church. The same God who was the author of the Bible had also founded an enduring institution on earth, an institution that spoke with divine authority. Nor was this institution some loose-knit and intangible community of believers; it was a very tangible and historically concrete body. It was nothing other than the Catholic Church founded on the apostles and governed by their successors the bishops, under the guidance of the successor of the Apostle Peter, the Bishop of Rome.

The same Spirit of God who had inspired the biblical writers guided the leaders of that church and kept them from error, particularly when they were called upon to define some central Christian doctrine. The teachings of the earliest church fathers, of church councils, and of individual popes provided the taken-for-granted interpretive lens through which patristic and medieval commentators viewed the biblical text. As we will see, this assumption was to endure until the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, and it would be reaffirmed in the Catholic response to that Reformation.

(c) Sacred and secular knowledge

The third assumption, that of harmony between sacred and secular knowledge, is a more complex affair. We may begin by noting that for patristic and medieval Christians, the distinction between what we would call sacred and secular knowledge was not primarily a distinction between two fields of knowledge. We might be tempted to think that secular and religious knowledge—science and religion, to use our modern

distinction—are distinct because they deal with two quite different objects. We might argue, for instance, that science deals with the structure and mechanism of the world, while religion deals with the relationship of that world to God. But for patristic and medieval thinkers, the distinction lay elsewhere.

Sacred and secular knowledge were distinguished not so much by their contents (which could overlap) as by their *source*. Sacred knowledge was knowledge derived from divine revelation. It included matters inaccessible to human reason, such as the mystery of the Trinitarian nature of God, but it also included matters that we would regard as the province of science, such as the origin of the world. Secular knowledge, on the other hand, was knowledge obtained not from revelation but by the exercise of human reason. It dealt primarily with this-worldly matters, but it was not restricted to some non-religious realm. Patristic and medieval thinkers believed that human reason could also attain to some knowledge of God by reflection on the world God created. It follows that for the church fathers and for medieval thinkers, sacred knowledge included knowledge of the structure of the world, while secular knowledge could include knowledge of God.

To many modern believers this view seems deeply problematic. Many Christians today argue that the objects of sacred and secular knowledge are distinct: sacred and secular knowledge are distinguished not so much by their source as by their *content*. This position betrays a very modern anxiety. It is driven by the fear that if science and religion did have the same object, if their content did overlap, the result would be conflict. This anxiety is a legacy of our modern debates about religion and science; it is foreign to the world of the patristic and medieval writers.

Even ancient Christian authors do not simply identify what we would call religion and science; they recognize that revelation and natural philosophy have different aims. But they also assume that their conclusions may overlap. For the church fathers this idea was relatively unproblematic. They take it for granted that there can be no irresolvable conflict between sacred and secular knowledge. Truth was ultimately one, whether that truth came directly from God or from the results of rational enquiry. If your interpretation

of Scripture brought you into conflict with the assured results of rational enquiry, it could be assumed you were misunderstanding the meaning of Scripture. If, on the other hand, the results of rational enquiry were not assured and they seemed to contradict Scripture, it could be assumed that one's rational enquiry had gone astray.

PATRISTIC AND MEDIEVAL EXEGESIS

Under the guidance of these assumptions the church fathers and medieval theologians interpreted particular biblical passages. I say "medieval theologians" because up until about the thirteenth century, the interpretation of Scripture stood at the very heart of the theological enterprise. Our modern faculties of theology and divinity schools customarily make a distinction between biblical studies and systematic theology. This modern distinction would have been foreign to a patristic or early medieval theologian; it has its roots in developments that occurred only in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries with the growth of the universities. For the patristic or early medieval theologian, theology was the study of the *sacra pagina*, the sacred page.

When we examine the particular methods of exegesis adopted by patristic and medieval scholars, what is most striking is their flexibility. Where a modern interpreter might seek to discover the meaning of a biblical passage, patristic and medieval interpreters regularly offer several differing interpretations of the same passage without any sense that these are in conflict. There seem to be two factors at work here to produce what to us is a remarkable result.

The first is that patristic and medieval writers did not judge the correctness of an interpretation by reference to textual features alone. Rather, the most important mark of an acceptable interpretation was the conformity of its content to the *regula fidei*, the rule of faith. If two differing interpretations both conformed to the rule of faith, they were both (in principle) acceptable. There was no need to choose between them. The second factor is a strong sense that the biblical text, as an inspired text, could have several levels of meaning. This belief in the multileveled character of the Bible encouraged patristic and medieval interpreters to understand each biblical passage in

several different ways. Both these features of ancient and medieval biblical interpretation deserve closer scrutiny.

(a) The *regula fidei* (rule of faith)

The modern biblical interpreter is inclined to judge the correctness of an interpretation by the method through which it is achieved. In other words, the rules of interpretation are methodological: if one observes certain safeguards in dealing with the text, then one can be confident about one's result. The church fathers and medieval scholars, on the other hand, enjoyed a great freedom when it came to methods of interpretation. Even these were not entirely arbitrary—there were rules of interpretation that the fathers followed—but at the end of the day an interpretation was judged acceptable primarily on the basis of its content. St. Augustine, for instance, can accept the possibility of many legitimate interpretations, but only if they are all "in harmony with our faith." Similarly, he will dismiss an interpretation that he regards as unacceptable with the simple judgment: "This is against our Catholic faith."

This body of belief against which interpretations were measured was often described as the rule of faith (*regula fidei*), a phrase that first seems to have been used by Christian writers of the second century. St. Augustine suggests that the content of this rule of faith can be derived from the clearer passages of Scripture and from the teachings of the church. It follows that those writers who employ the rule of faith as a mark of correct biblical interpretation are merely reflecting the second assumption named above. They are affirming a unity between what is taught by the Bible and what is taught by the church.

(b) The spiritual sense of Scripture

A second feature of patristic and medieval exegesis is its readiness to offer spiritual interpretations of biblical texts. (These are often described as "allegorical interpretations," but the phrase "spiritual interpretation" better expresses the understanding of the fathers.) The church fathers believed that just as the human being is composed of body and soul, so the Scriptures have both a bodily and a spiritual meaning. Spiritual interpretation involved finding new levels of meaning in the biblical text, hidden (as it were) beneath its surface or literal sense. Even if they were perhaps

not entirely clear to the human author of the text in question, these meanings were placed in the text by the divine author of Scripture.

This approach to the Bible may be illustrated by the story of Jesus' miraculous feeding of five thousand people (Mark 6:35-45). On a spiritual interpretation, such as that followed by St. Augustine in his sermons, the five loaves might be understood to represent the five books of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. Similarly, the boy who carried the loaves to Jesus could be seen to represent the Jewish people who carried the loaves without being able to break them open. Jesus' breaking of the loaves represented his explanation of the true sense of the Old Testament. This example also highlights a dark side of such spiritual interpretations: the fact that it often reinforced traditional Christian stereotypes about Jews.

Christians were by no means the first to use spiritual interpretation. This approach to texts had both Jewish and Greek roots. (The fact that it has Jewish roots is deeply ironic, given the way in which Christians often used the technique against Judaism.) Greek commentators on classical works had long employed allegory to offer morally uplifting interpretations of what were sometimes rather brutal stories. In the Jewish world, Philo of Alexandria (ca. 15 B.C.–A.D. 50) had used allegory to discover philosophical wisdom in the biblical narratives. But it was Christians who developed spiritual interpretation to a fine art in their attempts to bridge the gap between the Old and New Testaments, to avoid scandalous interpretations, and to find contemporary meanings in ancient texts.

(c) The four senses of Scripture

As early as the fifth century, the idea that biblical passages could possess a spiritual meaning had developed into the doctrine of the "four senses." In this doctrine, each biblical text could be read literally, according to its historical meaning. But it could also be read spiritually, and there existed three levels of spiritual interpretation. The allegorical sense spoke of the mysteries of faith. The moral sense spoke of how one was to live. The anagogical sense, as it was called, spoke of the hoped-for homeland of heaven. In the thirteenth century, this doctrine was encapsulated in a famous Latin verse:

<i>Littera gesta docet,</i>	The letter teaches what was done,
<i>quid credas allegoria,</i>	allegory what you are to believe,
<i>moralis quid agas,</i>	the moral sense what you are to do,
<i>quo tendas anagogia.</i>	the anagogical sense where you are to go.

If a psalm, for instance, spoke of a love for Jerusalem, then the literal meaning of this verse would refer to the Palestinian city of that name. Allegorically, Jerusalem could be understood to refer to the church. Morally, it could be understood as the human soul. Anagogically, it could be seen as a reference to the heavenly Jerusalem. While this doctrine of the four senses of Scripture was widely accepted in principle, it was rarely employed in practice. When patristic and medieval commentators came to study particular biblical passages, they tended to speak of just two senses: a literal and a spiritual. The latter could be an allegorical, a moral, or an anagogical meaning, depending on the passage being interpreted and the aim of the interpreter.

Biblical commentators of the late Middle Ages continued to speak of the spiritual sense of Scripture but laid increasing emphasis on the literal meaning. The great theologian St. Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1225–1274), for instance, insisted on the priority of the literal sense, that sense intended by the human author of the Bible. All other interpretations of Scripture, he insisted, were to be related to this literal or historical sense, and only the literal sense may be appealed to in theological debate. Nothing was lost by such restrictions, since every important Christian doctrine was somewhere contained in the literal meaning of the text.

In Thomas' view, the literal sense refers to certain historical realities. By controlling history, God has arranged that these historical realities can carry new levels of meaning. It is these new levels of meaning—in the events of history rather than in the text itself—that are the spiritual interpreter's task to discern. In effect, Thomas' teaching picks up and brings to a compromise solution some debates of the patristic period, when exponents of the spiritual sense (associated with the city of Alexandria) had competed with defenders

of the literal sense (often associated with the city of Antioch).

However untenable it may seem to us, this patristic and medieval doctrine of the spiritual senses of Scripture has great religious power. Indeed it is hard to see how certain texts, such as some of the psalms, could be used in prayer in any other way. Not only does spiritual interpretation enable Christians to avoid otherwise insoluble difficulties in biblical interpretation (such as passages in which God appears to be acting in brutal ways), it also enables believers to read the Old Testament as Christian Scripture that speaks (in veiled terms) of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Finally, spiritual interpretation frees the interpreter from the tyranny of history. For spiritual interpretation not only links the Old and New Testaments, but the patterns of divine activity and human response found in the Bible can be projected forward (as types) into the reader's own time. In this way even the biblical history that on the face of it has little to do with our own time can offer a pattern by which our own lives can be understood.

The power of this method of interpretation is easily illustrated by reference to the Old Testament story of the Exodus. The biblical story speaks not only of the escape of the Hebrews from

Egyptian slavery under Moses but also of the wandering in the wilderness of Sinai and the conquest of the land of Canaan. On the first level, that of a literal interpretation, the story can be read as a historical account of the origins of God's people: the events by which they became a nation, received the Law of Moses, and inherited the promised land.

Read spiritually, however, the same events could be projected forward to our own time to provide an explanation of contemporary events. (This was the way in which the Exodus story was read by nineteenth-century African-American slaves.) On a more personal level the events of the Exodus could represent the individual's journey of faith: from baptism (a release from the slavery of sin), through the desert wandering of this present life, across the Jordan River (that is, death), and into the promised land of eternal life. In all these different ways, spiritual interpretation provided a means of bridging the gap between past and present. It provided a way of incorporating later events, including the reader's own life, into the biblical framework. The collapse of this imaginative method of interpretation, at least among theologians and biblical scholars, would be one of the most significant developments of the modern period.

Reformation and Counter-Reformation (ca. 1500–1650)

The Protestant Reformation that begins with the work of Martin Luther (1483–1546) marked a new stage in Christian attitudes to the Bible. The degree of novelty, however, should not be overstated. For all their rebellion against the authority of the medieval Catholic Church, the Protestant Reformers maintained many of the attitudes of their medieval forebears. In the previous section of this study, for instance, I spoke of the three assumptions that were characteristic of patristic and medieval exegesis: namely, a unity between the Old and New Testaments, a conformity between the message of the Bible and that of the church, and a harmony between sacred and secular knowledge. It was only the second assumption—the unity of Bible and church—that the Protestant Reformers wished to call into question. Even here, what the Reformers were questioning was a particular conception of the relationship of Bible and church. They did not want to see the Bible removed entirely from the community of believers. There is, therefore, a real continuity between the Protestant Reformers and the medieval church.

Similarly, the Reformers had much in common with the period we know as the Renaissance, the “rebirth” of interest in the world of classical thought and literature that occurred in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. It was the humanist scholars of that period—people like Lorenzo Valla (1407–1457)—who pioneered the learning of classical languages (including New Testament Greek) and the art of textual criticism. This interest in classical antiquity led humanist scholars to a new sense of the distance between the world of the New Testament and that of the late medieval church. The first Protestants would draw on this sense of distance in order to call for a reform of the church by appeal to its New Testament model.

In this section of our study I will be concerned only to highlight what was new in the Reformers’ attitudes to the Bible. To do this I have chosen three issues, all related to the relationship between the Bible and the church. The first two issues have to do with the question of religious authority. Does the Bible require some authority outside of itself to make its meaning clear? More seriously, does the Bible require some authority outside of itself to authenticate its teachings, to assure us they are true? The third issue has to do with the nature of the biblical message. Do biblical texts have only one meaning, or are there—as patristic and medieval commentators believed—levels of meaning that the interpreter can discover? On all three questions the answers given by the Protestant Reformers would be unequivocal and would have consequences far beyond those they themselves intended.

THE BIBLE AND THE CHURCH

As they embarked on the task of calling for a reform of the church—a task that had become increasingly urgent in the preceding centuries—the first Protestants were faced with a problem. Their model for church reform was the picture of early Christianity that we find in the pages of the New Testament. But the New Testament had been traditionally interpreted in the light of the teaching and traditions of the church. To embark on their program of reform, they had to weaken the link between Bible and church, to insist that, while the Bible was clearly the church’s book, at the end of the day the church stood under its authority.

There were two principles in particular that allowed them to take this stand: the principle that the Bible interprets itself and the (closely related) principle that the Bible authenticates itself. But if

the church's authoritative intervention was to be truly redundant, a third principle was needed, one that protected Scripture from potentially obscure, spiritual interpretations. These three principles allowed the Reformers to argue that the word of God was accessible to the individual believer without any need for the intervention of bishops or theologians.

(a) The Bible interprets itself

The first of these principles, that the Bible interprets itself, was perhaps most characteristic of the thought of Martin Luther. Luther takes his stand on the traditional principle (echoed in 1965 by the Second Vatican Council) that the Bible is to be interpreted "according to that Spirit by which it was written." He argues that this is a general interpretive principle: every book must be understood in the spirit of its author. But where can the Spirit of the Bible be found if not in those writings he himself wrote? Therefore it is to the Bible itself we must look if we are to understand it correctly. In a word, Scripture is "its own interpreter." This assertion in turn assumes that the meaning of Scripture is clear. It is only because its meaning is accessible to all that it requires no external interpreter to elucidate its secrets. This represents another important Reformation principle: namely, "the clarity of Scripture."

At first sight these claims might seem to be evidently false. The meaning of the Bible is apparently not clear, since the same text gives rise to many apparently divergent interpretations. Indeed many people seem unable to understand its message at all. But for Luther the clarity of Scripture, its ability to interpret itself, is not a matter that could be proven or disproved by studying what actually happens. It is a matter of faith. It is only on the basis of biblical authority that the Bible can be known to have a clear meaning.

If, for instance, Jesus and the apostles argued from Scripture, we must assume that its meaning was sufficiently clear to establish their case. Similarly, 2 Peter 1:19 speaks of Scripture as "a lamp shining in a dark place," which would not be true if its meaning were obscure. If many interpreters are unable to grasp this clear meaning, it is merely an indication of human sinfulness. Similarly if interpreters claim to find hidden meanings in the Bible, this merely suggests they are imposing their own meanings on the sacred text

rather than submitting themselves to its authority. In this sense, the external clarity of Scripture is only obvious to one who enjoys the inward illumination of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit, by whom the Bible was inspired, who transforms this external clarity of Scripture into the inner clarity of perception.

(b) The Bible authenticates itself

Luther not only held that Scripture interprets itself; he also insisted that the Bible authenticates itself. It is, in itself, sufficient witness to its own authority. Once again this idea needs to be understood in relationship to the claims of the Catholic Church. Catholics could argue that the Reformers could not consistently reject the authority of the church, since it was the church that gave us the Bible. After all, it was the church that decided which books would form the New Testament canon. But for Luther the decision regarding the canon was merely an act of recognition. The church points out the authority of the Bible to us; she does not grant authority to the Bible. The Bible's authority comes from within. The Scripture bears witness to itself as God's word, and the church merely recognizes this fact. The church's decision regarding the canon does not mean that the church stands above the Bible any more than the fact that John the Baptist directs us to Christ means that John the Baptist stands above Christ.

This fundamental Reformation principle—that the Bible itself is sufficient evidence of its own authority—was developed by John Calvin (1509–1564) into the doctrine of "the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit." In effect, this doctrine spells out how it is that the Bible can be said to authenticate itself. It authenticates itself, Calvin argues, by way of the witness of the holy Spirit within the believer, a witness that is available only to one who grasps the biblical message in faith. This acceptance in faith yields a form of knowledge that is both direct and certain. To ask how one knows that the Bible is the word of God is like asking how we know light from darkness or how we distinguish sweet and bitter tastes. Just as sugar, for instance, is sufficient evidence of its own sweetness to one who tastes it, so the Bible is sufficient evidence of its own truth to one who is prepared to accept its message.

This evidence, we might note, is private rather than public. Each individual must make the act

of faith and experience for oneself the internal testimony of the Bible's truth. (I don't know that sugar is sweet unless I have tasted it myself.) Calvin also believes that there exist what are sometimes called external evidences in support of biblical authority (such as accounts of miracles and of the fulfillment of prophecy), which are matters open to public scrutiny. But Calvin seeks certainty, the certainty on which the troubled believer can base one's assurance of salvation. No merely human authority, no merely human argument, can offer the certainty that divine revelation can provide. It must therefore be God who witnesses to the authority of the Bible by way of the voice of the Holy Spirit within the believer.

In all these discussions, we should note, the Reformers are not only trying to establish the authority of Scripture over against that of the Catholic Church. They are also trying to avoid the subjectivism (as we might call it) of the radical wing of the Reformation, the enthusiasts, who appealed to the voice of the Spirit within each believer as the final source of religious authority. For Luther and Calvin, the alleged voice of the holy Spirit within must be tested against the assured voice of the holy Spirit without, in Scripture. In this sense, the Reformers regarded the character of the Bible as a fixed, written document (its objectivity, as we might say) as a bulwark against individualist forms of interpretation. (One could, of course, argue from the subsequent history of Protestantism that this bulwark is not as strong as they supposed.)

(c) The Bible has a single meaning

There is one feature of the Reformers' attitude to the Bible that is often regarded as standing in clear contrast to the attitude of patristic and medieval thinkers. The Reformers appear at first sight to reject allegorical interpretations of the Bible. The Reformers' suspicion of allegorical interpretation is closely related to the first principle discussed above: that the Bible interprets itself and that its meaning is therefore clear. If the meaning of the Bible is clear, then one cannot speak of hidden meanings in the text, for this suggests the Scripture requires some external authority for its elucidation.

The Reformers insisted that the Bible has one simple meaning and that this meaning was accessible to any true believer. Luther, for instance,

speaks of "the one constant and simple sense of Scripture," while Calvin asserts that "the true meaning of Scripture is the natural and simple one." This one meaning of Scripture is nothing other than the message of Christ. While the New Testament proclamation of the gospel speaks explicitly of Christ, even the Old Testament Law is designed to lead us to him.

Yet if we are to find the message of Christ in the Old Testament, we cannot avoid reading certain passages in other than their immediate sense. In particular, we must argue that certain Old Testament events and individuals somehow foreshadow the events of the New Testament. The Reformers did not want to remove this possibility; on the contrary, they practiced such spiritual interpretations themselves. Luther, for instance, could see the Old Testament festival of Passover that commemorated the Exodus from Egypt as an image (or type) of the deliverance from sin that Christians celebrate at Easter.

In other words, what the Reformers objected to was not so much the discovery of a spiritual sense in Scripture as the neglect of the literal sense. A spiritual sense was acceptable provided it was clearly related to the literal sense. They were not the first people in Christian history to argue this way. As we have seen, the late Middle Ages saw a growing emphasis on the literal sense, a feature that we find, for instance, in the work of St. Thomas Aquinas. Here, too, the Reformers were not far removed from at least some of their medieval forebears.

There is a final qualification to be added that relates particularly to Martin Luther's attitude to Scripture. While Luther insists that the whole of the Bible witnesses to Christ, he also argues that not all parts of Scripture do so with equal clarity. The Old Testament Law, for instance, witnesses to Christ primarily in a negative way by making human beings aware of their sinfulness and of their need for God's grace. Even within the New Testament, the witness to Christ is not equally clear throughout. It is in the letters of St. Paul that we find the gospel message of justification by faith expressed most clearly. The letter of James, on the other hand, while well-intentioned, only obscures that message. Individual passages of the Bible and even individual books need to be judged against the message of God's grace, a message that stands at the heart of the Bible.

THE CATHOLIC RESPONSE

The Catholic response to these developments was to reaffirm and to clarify the link between Bible and church. A key document here is a decree passed in 1546 by the great Council of the Counter-Reformation, the Council of Trent. With regard to the text of the Bible, the decree first of all defined the canon of Scripture (over against the Reformers' rejection of the apocrypha or deuterocanonical books) and declared that the Vulgate Latin version of the Bible was to be taken as an authoritative translation.

With regard to the interpretation of the Bible, the decree made two points. First, it insisted that divine revelation was to be found not just in the written Scriptures but also in the unwritten traditions that the church has handed down from age to age. Second, it decreed that "no one . . . should dare to interpret Sacred Scripture in matters of faith and morals in a way that runs contrary to that meaning which the Holy Mother Church has held and holds . . . or even contrary to the unanimous consensus of the Fathers." In other words, the Council of Trent stated that it is the right of the church, and not of any individual, to decide on the true meaning of Scripture. It also insisted that a proposed interpretation of Scripture must be in conformity with church tradition as represented by "the consensus of the Fathers."

The intention of the Council is clear and—from a Catholic point of view—seems reasonable. In opposition to the apparent individualism of the Protestant Reformers, the Council wished to locate the interpretation of the Bible firmly within the life of the church. Unfortunately in this matter as in so many others, the Council did not simply re-establish the position held by the church before the Reformation. It hardened that position, stating it in very strict terms and surrounding it with penalties. For this reason the Council of Trent's decree on biblical interpretation made it difficult for Catholics to engage in the necessary task of biblical reinterpretation in succeeding centuries. It contributed, for instance, to the church's tragic condemnation of the astronomer Galileo Galilei (1564–1642), less than a hundred years after the Council at which this decree was promulgated. Galileo was himself a devout Catholic and defended his religious position with vigor. But even if Galileo's heliocentric view of the universe was not, strictly speaking, contrary to church teaching (since it had never been explicitly discussed), it could be said to be contrary to the unanimous consensus of the church fathers (who took the older view of the universe for granted). Another 350 years would pass before Catholic biblical scholars could begin to enjoy the freedom they so desperately required.

The Bible in the Modern Era

(ca. 1650–today)

THE DEVELOPMENT OF HISTORICAL CRITICISM

Between the age of the Protestant Reformers and our own time lies a great gulf, created by the emergence of what is often described as historical criticism of the Bible. (The word “criticism” here does not imply finding fault; it has its original sense of “analysis,” in the same sense as one speaks about literary criticism. Older writers sometimes distinguish between lower criticism, the textual criticism discussed in the first part of this study, and higher criticism, the focus of the present discussion.) What is the historical criticism of the Bible? When and how did it emerge?

The simplest way of approaching this momentous shift in attitude is by way of the question of authorship. Christians had always recognized that the Bible had human authors. Its authors were believed to be Moses (in the case of the first five books) and the prophets of the Old Testament, as well as the evangelists and apostles of the New Testament. But if the Bible had human authors, this fact was not regarded as terribly significant; it was overshadowed by belief in the Bible’s divine inspiration. As an inspired work, the Bible could be said to have God as its author.

This attitude began to change in the seventeenth century. In a process that began in the mid-1600s and accelerated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the divine authorship of the Bible came to be overshadowed by a new focus on its human authorship. Very often, the divine inspiration of Scripture was not denied. Many biblical interpreters remained devout Christians who continued, at least in principle, to hold to the doctrine of inspiration. But their focus was now on the Bible as a document of human history, a work comparable to any other, produced by human beings and able to be studied using the same methods as other documents of history.

What lay behind this shift? The religious thought of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was characterized by a crisis of biblical interpretation and (at a deeper level) a crisis of biblical authority. The wars of religion that followed the Protestant Reformation had contributed to this crisis, with both sides claiming biblical authority for their persecution of those who disagreed. The deepest reason for this crisis lay in the new knowledge of the age, both scientific and historical, and the challenge this posed to biblical interpretation.

There were, for instance, tensions between the biblical view of the universe and that emerging from the new Copernican astronomy espoused by such thinkers as Galileo Galilei. With the voyages of discovery that opened up the cultures of Asia and the Americas to European thought, there also emerged difficulties with the Bible’s view of history. The approximately six thousand years of the biblical chronology seemed unable to accommodate either the diversity of human cultures or the existence of ancient nonbiblical civilizations such as that of China.

There were, of course, many thinkers for whom this new knowledge simply discredited biblical authority. To such thinkers, Christianity appeared to be merely one religion among others, no longer able to enjoy its taken-for-granted place in human life. Similarly, its Scriptures seemed to be merely one set of sacred writings among others, all too obviously the product of human beings whose knowledge was limited to that of their time and place. Even those who wished to maintain their traditional faith were forced to admit that the biblical writers had been very much men of their age. Divine inspiration had not lifted them above the limited knowledge of their own cultures. If the Bible was to have a message for today, that message needed to be understood as shaped by the particular historical context in which it was received.

It was these developments that lay behind the emergence of historical criticism. The earliest forms of such criticism focused on the Old Testament, particularly the first five books (the Pentateuch). Nineteenth-century scholars began to dismember these books, to see them as the product of a long period of transmission—both by word of mouth and in writing—and of editing. The most famous outcome was the division of the first five books of the Bible into four written sources: the Yahwist (J), the Elohist (E), the Deuteronomic (D), and the Priestly (P), a division that arose from the work of Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918).

This analysis allowed one, for instance, to distinguish between the first and the second chapters of Genesis. Genesis 1 came to be seen as a composition belonging to the so-called Priestly tradition, from relatively late in Israel's history, while Genesis 2 was a work from the Yahwist tradition, containing material from much earlier in Israel's history. These forms of analysis were soon applied to the New Testament where a key issue was that of the composition of the gospels. Here the most notable achievement was the two-source theory of the gospels, first formulated by Heinrich Julius Holtzmann (1832–1910). According to this theory, the Gospel of Mark was the earliest of our canonical gospels, while Matthew and Luke were composed using both Mark and a now-lost written collection of Jesus' sayings that has come to be known as Q (probably from the German *Quelle*, "source").

There is no need to dwell on these developments or on the fate of these theories in more recent times. (Those matters will be discussed in the later volumes in this series.) In this context we need only note some of the consequences of historical criticism. One of the most noteworthy was a gradual widening of the gap between the academic study of the Bible and its use in the churches. The historical criticism of the Bible seemed to require no particular religious commitment: it was a work of secular scholarship. Therefore the biblical scholars who pioneered these methods often thought of themselves as historians rather than as theologians.

From many points of view, this was a good thing. It allowed, for instance, Catholic, Protestant, and even Jewish scholars to work together in a common academic undertaking, setting aside for the moment their confessional commitments.

But when one took their results back into the life of the church (or synagogue), it was difficult to know what use could be made of them. To put it bluntly, once one had understood what the Bible meant to those for whom it was written, the question remained of what it means to the contemporary believer. Ancient Babylonian creation myths may well shed light upon the book of Genesis, but they are not the kind of thing that would inspire your average congregation.

This widening gap between biblical scholarship and church life was exacerbated by another feature of historical criticism: its complete neglect of the spiritual interpretation. Patristic and medieval writers, convinced of the divine authorship of the Bible, were prepared to find meanings in the biblical text that would have been inaccessible to their human authors. For instance, while the eighth-century B.C. author of Isaiah 7:14 ("... the virgin shall be with child, and bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel") could hardly be expected to know about the yet-to-occur virginal conception of Jesus, the God who inspired him certainly did. This could therefore constitute a new level of meaning above and beyond that intended by the human author.

The Protestant Reformers condemned the more fanciful forms of allegorical interpretation, but they continued to believe that the Bible spoke of a divinely guided history in which the events of the Old Testament could be seen to foreshadow those of the New Testament, as well as shedding light on the events of their own time. Among historical critics such ways of reading the Bible seemed entirely discredited. Since historians, as historians, could not speak of divine inspiration or of a divinely guided history, all they could do was to describe the one meaning intended by the human author. Believers found themselves marooned in the past with no way of building a bridge to later times or to the present.

THE RECEPTION OF HISTORICAL CRITICISM

It is perhaps a tribute to the adaptive power of religious traditions that what began as a serious challenge to biblical authority was gradually absorbed into mainstream Christian practice. This positive reception, however, was far from universal. The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries

witnessed a strong conservative reaction against historical criticism among both Protestant and Catholic Christians.

(a) The Protestant Churches

Given the uniquely important role the Bible plays within Protestant Christianity, one would expect a certain suspicion of historical criticism among conservative Protestants. Historical critics argued that the Bible needed to be understood as a human work, the product of particular historical contexts. In practice this suggested that the authority of the Bible was a limited authority: it was limited by the assumptions of its authors who were people of their time and place. Sometimes we must judge their ideas to have been simply mistaken.

To many conservative Christians, such claims seemed to overlook the divine inspiration of the Bible. If these authors were divinely inspired, God would at the very least have protected them from making false statements. God could also have raised their minds above the limitations of their own cultural context to transmit truths that were of divine and not merely human origin. The Bible, such Christians insisted, was not merely a record of human thought or of religious experience; it was a record of, or at least a witness to, divine revelation.

The great rallying point for conservative Protestants soon became the doctrine of biblical infallibility or inerrancy, the belief that the Bible was without error. This was the first doctrine defended in a famous series of booklets entitled *The Fundamentals*, published in the United States from 1909 onward and distributed to large numbers of Christian teachers and leaders. (Over three million copies were eventually circulated.)

A similar list of doctrines was adopted by the General Assembly of the North Presbyterian Church in 1910. On this occasion, too, the first of the “fundamentals of faith” to be defended was belief in the inspiration and infallibility of the Bible. Incidentally, the term “fundamentalist” dates from this period. It seems to have been coined following a similar defense of basic Christian beliefs at the Northern Baptist Convention in 1920. The word was initially used on both sides of the debate, being willingly embraced by those to whom it was applied. Only gradually has it become a term of opprobrium.

It is easy to ridicule the more extreme manifestations of this movement. It achieved notoriety, for example, in 1925 during the trial in Dayton, Tennessee, of John T. Scopes, a secondary school teacher who taught Darwin’s theory of evolution in defiance of a religiously motivated state law. Although Scopes was convicted (the decision later being overturned on a technicality), there were many who saw the trial as a symbol of religious ignorance in the face of scientific knowledge. Such tendencies have not gone away. On the contrary, resistance to the theory of evolution seems to have increased, particularly in the United States. A 1991 survey suggested that 47 percent of Americans believe that “man was created pretty much in his present form at one time within the last 10,000 years,” a statement that implies a remarkably literal interpretation of Genesis 1. To avoid the constitutional implications of introducing religious beliefs into public classrooms, defenders of a literal reading of Genesis 1 have recently begun describing their position as creation science (offering it as a scientific rather than a religious position) or simply as evidence against evolution. However, its roots lie in the same reaffirmation of biblical authority that prompted the Scopes trial of 1925.

Not all conservative Protestants, however, have adopted such extreme views. The great British evangelical J. I. Packer (b. 1926), a defender of conservative Christianity, insists that the inerrancy of the Bible does not necessarily imply a woodenly literal interpretation of what it teaches. For instance, there is nothing to prevent the devout Christian from reading the story of Adam and Eve as a symbolic expression of revealed truth. Packer also argues that one should not confuse the message of the Bible (what it actually teaches) with those beliefs about the world that the biblical writers simply took for granted. Belief in the inerrancy of the Bible need not extend to the latter any more than it implies that the biblical authors always wrote grammatically perfect Hebrew, for “they do not claim to teach either science or grammar.”

Even in the early twentieth century there existed evangelical Christians who combined a reaffirmation of biblical authority with attempts to take seriously the claims of history and the sciences. A key figure here, particularly for American evangelicalism, was J. Gresham Machen (1881–1937),

who had been trained in German New Testament scholarship and who could use at least some of its methods in defense of traditional Christian doctrines. Machen also realized that the crisis of biblical authority transcended the divisions established by the Reformation. On the matters that divide Protestants from Catholics he stood firmly with the Reformers, but he could see that on central matters of doctrine conservative Protestants and Catholics had much in common.

(b) The Catholic Church

While the leading biblical scholars of the nineteenth century were from the Protestant world, it was not long before Catholic scholars became interested in their work. They were hampered, however, by a conservative reaction on the part of the Catholic authorities, one that in many ways parallels that found among Protestants. The mood of the Roman authorities in the mid-nineteenth century was not conducive to freedom of thought. In 1864, for instance, Pope Pius IX issued a *Syllabus of Errors*, a list of eighty propositions that he regarded as worthy of condemnation. These propositions covered a very wide range of topics. Among the condemned propositions were those that asserted that Scripture was no more than a record of human experience and that the Bible's account of events is not always historically accurate. The same Pope summoned the First Vatican Council (1870), which strongly reaffirmed the Council of Trent's position on the canon, divine inspiration, and biblical interpretation.

In 1893 there was a change of mood. In that year Pius IX's successor, Pope Leo XIII, issued an encyclical on biblical interpretation entitled *Providentissimus Deus*. In many respects this encyclical was exceedingly cautious. It reaffirmed both the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, insisted on the traditional Catholic principles of interpretation, and condemned the pretensions of higher criticism, which it associated with the rationalist attack on the idea of revelation. The encyclical did, however, encourage serious biblical scholarship: the study of biblical texts in the original languages using the best methods of analysis available. It also addressed the apparent conflict between the biblical worldview and that of modernity. It suggested that, while it was not permissible to limit the authority of the Bible to matters

of faith and morals, we should recognize that the sacred writers were not trying to teach scientific truths. Rather, they were concerned to teach those things that are "profitable to salvation" (a principle first enunciated by St. Augustine). In doing so, the sacred writers sometimes expressed their message in language that was "more or less figurative" or "in terms that were commonly used at the time."

A year before the publication of this encyclical, Leo XIII had commended the work of Marie-Joseph Lagrange (1855–1938), a Dominican priest who in 1890 had founded the *École Biblique*, a school of advanced biblical studies in Jerusalem. Lagrange is perhaps the greatest pioneer of historical criticism among Catholics. To open the door to historical criticism, Lagrange had been forced to rethink the doctrine of divine inspiration.

Whereas previous descriptions of inspiration had suggested that the sacred writers were merely passive recipients of the divine message, Lagrange insisted that they were truly authors. They were responsible for the entire process by which the Scriptures were composed: namely, gathering sources, both written and oral, selecting material, and shaping it into its present form. Throughout this process they were guided by God so that what they taught was indeed without error. What they taught, however, must be sharply distinguished from the forms in which the teaching is clothed. With regard to the latter we need to take into account the existence of different literary genres so that we may judge some stories to be edifying fiction rather than historical fact. (One thinks, for instance, of the story of Jonah and the large fish.) We also need to take into account the intention of the sacred writers. Sometimes, for instance, they simply repeat the account of Israel's history that they find in their sources without intending to endorse its accuracy.

While these seem bold statements for a Catholic to make at the beginning of the twentieth century, Lagrange could appeal to sections of *Providentissimus Deus* in support of his views. However, if the pontificate of Leo XIII represented a cautious opening of the door to historical criticism, that door soon closed. Alarmed by developments in a number of fields, his successor Pope Pius X issued a series of documents in 1907 condemning a number of propositions under the

heading of modernism. Among the Pope's targets was the proposition that the biblical interpreter should approach Scripture as a "merely human document." While critics such as Lagrange were also devout believers who did not regard the Bible as a merely human document, the change of tone was clear.

One of the first victims of this crisis was the French biblical scholar and theologian Alfred Loisy (1857–1940). While Loisy's work included a defense of the Catholic view of religious authority, his critical attitude toward the historical value of the gospels resulted in his excommunication in 1908. In 1905 Père Lagrange himself was forbidden to publish on any controversial question and, after failing to obtain permission to publish works in Old Testament studies, switched his attention to the New Testament. In 1912–1913 he was also removed for a time from his post at L'École Biblique. Although he was later restored to his position, he no longer dared to tackle such a dangerous question as that of inspiration.

The effect of what has come to be known as the modernist crisis was to drive Catholic biblical scholarship underground. The moment at which it emerged was the publication in 1943 of an encyclical by Pope Pius XII entitled *Divino Afflante Spiritu*. The encyclical endorses the view of inspiration defended by Lagrange, according to which the sacred writer is a true author, using all his human powers in the composition of what he writes.

It follows that the interpreter must try to understand the character of these human authors, the context in which they were writing, the sources they used, and the forms of expression they employed. In other words, the primary task of the biblical scholar is to uncover the literal meaning of the biblical text, that is to say, the meaning intended by its human authors. To discover this meaning the interpreter ought to use the same

methods of interpretation as would be used for any other human document. While repeating the traditional Catholic view that the final arbiter of the sense of Scripture must be the church, in accordance with her own tradition, the encyclical notes that relatively few passages of Scripture have had their meaning fixed in this way. There is still plenty of freedom for the biblical scholar. With these remarkable statements, the highest authority of the Catholic Church formally endorsed the program of historical criticism.

The publication of *Divino Afflante Spiritu* was a watershed in the Catholic Church's attitude to modern biblical scholarship. The Second Vatican Council with its Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*, 1965) offers a further endorsement of historical criticism but adds little to the program set out in *Divino Afflante Spiritu*. Nor has this endorsement been withdrawn in more recent times.

Indeed a 1993 statement by the Pontifical Biblical Commission, while approving a wide range of new methods of interpretation, describes the historical-critical method as "the indispensable method for the scientific study of the meaning of ancient texts." In this respect the Commission is surely correct. Whatever criticisms it may meet at the hands of its detractors, it is difficult to see how one could dispense with the historical-critical approach to the Bible. As we will see shortly, even some "postmodern" critics have recently returned to the historical study of the Bible, although in a more nuanced and self-conscious way. It seems that the best insights of the historical critics are here to stay. If the next section of this work is entitled "Postmodern Biblical Interpretation," this is not intended to suggest that the historical criticism, so characteristic of the modern age, is now superseded. It suggests only that it must now be supplemented by more sophisticated approaches to the meaning of the biblical text.

Postmodern Biblical Interpretation

THE INDETERMINACY OF MEANING

At the beginning of this second part of our study, I made a few remarks about what it means to interpret a work. In particular, I insisted that one cannot escape the obligation of interpretation. To read a work and understand it *is* to interpret it. We must now return to these questions, for in our own time there has been an explosion of new approaches to biblical interpretation. What these new approaches have in common is a new sense of what is involved in interpreting a text.

In particular, many contemporary interpreters insist that the act of interpretation is a much more complex matter than was previously thought. They focus on those dimensions of the act of interpretation that destabilize textual meaning by suggesting that the biblical text cannot be given a single, definitive interpretation. (This is sometimes described as the “indeterminacy” of textual meaning.)

In this section of our study, I will look at those dimensions of interpretation highlighted by postmodern critics. If I deal with these matters in some detail, it is because such interpreters do not always make their intentions clear. Their work is all too often marred by confusing jargon and inflated rhetoric. I have therefore tried to set out as clearly as possible what they are attempting to do.

(a) Part and whole

The first dimension of the act of interpretation to be highlighted by postmodern thinkers is one that has long been familiar to students of the Bible. It is often described as the hermeneutical circle. (As we will see, this phrase has at least two meanings; we will look at its second meaning shortly.) The act of interpretation involves a circular movement in which the individual parts of a text are understood in light of the text as a

whole, and the text as a whole is understood in light of its individual parts. In principle, this process has no end.

To explore this insight we may start with a simple and familiar idea. It is the idea that one cannot properly understand any particular passage of a written work in isolation; it must be understood in context by reference to the larger work to which it belongs. To take a well-known example, it would seriously misrepresent the meaning of Psalm 53 to take the second part of its first verse, namely, “There is no God,” in isolation from its setting where it is prefaced by the words, “Fools say in their hearts.” But it is not just the other part of the verse that is important; you cannot properly understand Psalm 53:1 until you have read the psalm as a whole. For only at the end of the psalm does it become clear why the psalmist believes it is foolish to deny the existence or the power of God.

As a general rule, then, each part of a text must be read with reference to the text as a whole. Of course, the converse is also true. It may be stating the obvious but the point is worth making: the whole text can be understood only after reading each of its parts. These two facts together give rise to a circular movement. The parts of a text must be understood by reference to the whole, but the whole can be understood only by reference to its parts. In the case of simple texts, such as a single sentence, this process need not continue very long. A single reading may be enough to establish a satisfactory understanding of what we are reading. In the case of more complex texts (such as a Shakespearian play or a biblical book), each new reading may well alter our perception of the work as a whole. Having achieved this new perception, we can go back and find new significance in passages that we have already read.

A moment’s reflection will suggest that this procedure has, in principle, no natural conclusion.

The interpreter can continue to travel this circle indefinitely. Having achieved our new understanding of the text as a whole, we go back and reread each of its parts. But in the case of a complex text, this process of rereading may lead us to alter our understanding of the whole work. This would lead us back into yet another reconsideration of individual passages, and so on.

Of course, there are lots of practical reasons for bringing this process to an end. Interpreters will soon tire of this task. They will decide they have achieved a sufficient understanding of the work before them. But that is not the point. The point is that, in principle, the hermeneutical circle could continue indefinitely. If this is the case, then no one interpretation of a complex text can claim to be final, once and for all. It represents nothing more than the point at which the interpreter has abandoned the work of interpretation.

The problem is particularly acute in the case of the Bible, since it is not clear to which whole any individual biblical text belongs. In the case of Psalm 53, for instance, it is clear that each verse should be read as part of the psalm as a whole. But what about the whole of the Psalter? If we insist, for example, that Isaiah 7:14 is to be read in the light of the book of Isaiah as a whole, then should we not read Psalm 53 in the light of the Psalter as a whole? But has the Psalter as a whole any real unity? Is it truly a "book"? Or is it merely a collection of writings related by nothing more than their literary genre? And while we may insist that the Bible as a whole is a collection of books, does that collection also have a certain unity? If it does, should Psalm 53 not be understood in the light of the Bible as a whole? (This has been the issue raised by those who espouse a canonical approach to biblical interpretation.) But if so, whose Bible should we choose? The Hebrew Bible (*Tanakh*) or the Christian Bible? And why stop with the covers of our Bible? What is the largest possible literary whole in the light of which individual biblical texts should be read? One may wish to stop with the limits of the canon. But on historical or literary grounds, it is not clear why these limits should be so significant.

(b) The historical context

A second cause of uncertainty in interpretation arises from a matter that lies at the heart of a historically oriented approach to the Bible. It has to

do with the question of the historical context in the light of which the text is to be understood. There are two problems here. First, the historical context of biblical texts is enormously rich. With regard to the New Testament in particular, we know almost too much about the world from which it emerged. This means that the interpreter must make a choice of certain features of this rich social and cultural environment in order to shed light on the text to be interpreted. To take a well-known example, John's Gospel begins by speaking about the "Word" of God, which became flesh in the figure of Jesus. How are we to understand this term "Word"? Should we understand it against the background of the Word (*logos*) doctrine of popular Greek philosophy? Should we understand it in the light of the Old Testament's descriptions of the Word of God? Or should both understandings of the term "Word" be taken into account? How are we to decide?

There is a second problem that seems even more intractable. While we may agree that a biblical text is to be understood in its historical context, there are no apparent limits to what this term can embrace. The problem is not just that the Bible emerged from a complex historical context. It is that the borders of that context can be continuously redrawn, like a series of concentric circles, with no obvious end in sight. Every artifact of human culture is created against the background of an indefinitely large set of assumptions. When you begin to trace these assumptions, you find that one rests on another, so that the process of explication has no natural end. Understanding one social institution involves understanding another, and this in turn involves understanding a third.

To take a simple example, when the New Testament authors refer to Jesus as the "Messiah" (in Greek, *Christos*), what does this term mean? To understand their use of this term, we may need to understand the Old Testament notion of kingship. But to understand kingship we may need to understand how ancient Near Eastern thinkers thought about society. To understand their view of society, we may need to understand their view of human nature. And so the process continues. Indeed the situation is even worse than might appear from this brief description. Each element in this series is itself susceptible to many different interpretations: it can be understood in many

different ways, depending on the context in which it is placed.

Now once again these arguments may seem rather abstract, having little practical significance. In practice we are rarely deterred by such considerations. Whatever the student of interpretation may say, we do in fact arrive at decisions about textual meaning. We believe that we have understood enough of the biblical world to make such decisions. This is, of course, true. But it does not mean we can dismiss the arguments put forward by postmodernists.

Such interpreters are not arguing that we can never arrive at a decision regarding the meaning of a text. They are arguing that such decisions are always revisable. There is always another fact about the biblical world, another way of regarding it or a larger context in which it may be set that would reopen the question of what the biblical text means. Nor is this difficulty merely theoretical. We see its practical consequences every day in the world of biblical scholarship. That scholarship is characterized by the apparently endless production of books and articles on already heavily interpreted texts, such as—to take but one example—the letter to the Romans.

(c) The “intentional fallacy”

One way in which historical critics tried to control the process of interpretation was to focus on what is often called authorial intent. Many historical critics insist that our task is to try to understand what the human author of the Bible was attempting to say. So we can restrict our study of the biblical world to those features that would be known to the author in question. For instance, if we knew that the author of a particular New Testament book belonged to a predominantly Palestinian Jewish world, then we might choose to neglect currents of thought that were operative only in Hellenistic (Greek-speaking) Judaism. If one adopts this approach, there are clear limits to what evidence should be brought forward in favor of a particular interpretation.

In the 1940s and 1950s, however, a series of literary critics—often known as the New Critics—began to attack this assumption, not (admittedly) in biblical studies but in the study of literature. Such critics dismissed the attempt to discover the author’s intended meaning as the intentional fallacy. First of all, they insisted, the author’s inten-

tion is a psychological fact that is inaccessible to us (at least if we can no longer question the author in person). In the case of most works of literature, the author is dead. All that survives is the author’s intention as embodied in the work.

If this is the case, then the focus of our attention ought to be the work, not its author. Even if the author were here to be questioned, these critics argued, why should his or her account of the meaning of the work be privileged? After all, whatever the authors’ intention may have been, they may have failed to embody it in what they wrote. The final work, in other words, may fall short of their intended meaning. More commonly, however, skillful authors will create a work that goes beyond their intentions. By marshaling the resources of human language, with all the echoes and resonances that such language can convey, they will put more into their work than they are aware of. To restrict interpretation to what the authors intended is to miss out on the richness of human literature, its power to speak to new generations in new ways.

This line of argument has led to a plethora of what are sometimes called *literary* readings of the Bible that study the text with a view to discovering its possible meanings rather than its original meaning. Insofar as they focus on the text rather than its author, such readings also imply that the act of interpretation should be open-ended. One can never decide that this *is* the meaning of the text, since new readers, living in a new situation and having new sets of concerns, may find features in the text that we have overlooked. They should not be dissuaded from doing so by the fact that the new meanings they discover may not have been what the author intended. One could even argue that skillful authors will intend meanings of which they are unaware, insofar as they intend that their works be read in new ways by new generations of readers. If this is the case, one could argue that the interpreter would be faithful to the authors’ intentions only by ignoring them!

(d) Text and reader

A later generation of interpreters would pick up and develop these reflections on the role of the reader. This would lead them to be critical of our customary ways of talking about textual meaning. In particular, they would question the idea that meaning somehow resides *in* a text. The meaning

of a text, they argued, is not already there, fixed on the page, needing only to be drawn out (as the Greek origins of the word “exegesis” would suggest). Rather, meaning emerges from the interaction of text and reader. If the reader did not bring certain assumptions to the act of reading, the text would have no meaning at all.

It follows that what we call the text is merely a series of traces, out of which a meaning needs to be constructed on each occasion it is read. Rather than having a meaning, a text has a certain potential for meaning. It is the reader who decides (consciously or unconsciously) in what ways that potential is to be realized.

The written text, it is argued, resembles a musical score. A musical score is not itself music. To become music it must be performed. Similarly, a written text does not yet have a particular meaning. It acquires a particular meaning only when it is appropriated by a particular reader. It follows that there is a second sense in which we may talk about a hermeneutical circle. This is the circle of interpretation that takes us from text to reader and then back to the text. What we call the meaning of the text emerges only from this process. The reader’s understanding of the text is at least partly shaped by the assumptions brought to the act of reading.

At its most extreme, this position would hold that the reader actually creates the text through what appears to be merely an act of interpretation. In this situation, one can say that there are as many texts as there are readers. A less extreme form of this view would hold that readers fall into interpretive communities, each holding more or less common sets of assumptions. We may then say that there are as many texts as there are interpretive communities.

A still weaker but perhaps more defensible form of this argument would avoid saying that readers create their text. Any text has features that are independent of its readers or (more precisely) features that can be recognized by different communities of readers. Even if readers do not create the text, they certainly complete it. The text has meaning only because of the interaction between its independently existing features and its readers’ assumptions, which will be drawn from the interpretive community to which they belong.

Whatever form of this argument one accepts, it has some interesting implications. For instance,

interpreters who hold such a view may spend as much time talking about themselves as they talk about the text. They would argue that it is their assumptions, or those of their interpretive community, that will determine the shape of their interpretation.

Indeed many postmodern interpreters will begin their work with a brief statement of who they are and of the communities to which they belong. Since the interpreters’ backgrounds inevitably shape their interpretation, they would argue, these matters are best made explicit so that the reader may be warned in advance. Another expression of these ideas is the tendency toward autobiographical criticism, in which autobiographical facts are brought into interaction with the text to be interpreted. We have come a long way from the scientific objectivity with which the pioneers of historical criticism wished to escape the clutches of confessional religious commitments!

(e) A hermeneutics of suspicion

There is yet another dimension to postmodern approaches to interpretation. This is the realization that biblical readers may not be innocent. They may claim to be neutral and disinterested, objective interpreters of the text. While these professions of objectivity may be made in good faith, they should not be taken at face value. Postmodern interpreters insist that all our knowledge of the world is shaped by who we are and by our location in society. Of particular importance here is the idea of ideology, first developed by Marxist theorists.

The word “ideology” can sometimes be used in a neutral way to refer simply to a particular set of ideas. But since the time of Karl Marx (1818–1883) the term has had a more specialized use. It refers to the way in which the members of a dominant social group become so involved in the maintenance of their social position that their thinking becomes distorted. They are simply unable to see any facts that might undermine their dominant role in society. Ideology in this sense is a way of thinking that blinds us to what is really going on in a society that gives legitimacy to existing structures of domination and oppression.

The idea that interpretations of the Bible may be shaped by ideological factors is a major theme of postmodern biblical criticism. But postmodernists

suggest that it is not only biblical interpretation that may be shaped by the interests of some dominant group. The message of the Bible itself may also have suffered various forms of ideological distortion. As we have seen, even if we regard the Bible as the word of God, we must recognize that the divine word is expressed in human words. Would divine inspiration have protected the biblical authors from the distortions of knowledge that we now know affect us all? If our answer to that question is “no,” then the task of the interpreter should surely include ideological criticism—the process whereby these misleading and oppressive patterns of thought are unmasked for what they truly are.

Depending on which oppressed group is the focus of the interpreter’s concern, this ideological criticism of the Bible can give rise to a number of different approaches. The first expression of this concern was found in the work of the liberation theologians who read the Bible in the light of the situation of the poor, particularly in the countries of the Third World. Among Catholic liberation theologians, the criticism of ideology has often been coupled with the idea of a preferential option for the poor, an idea that has been given cautious approval by a number of popes.

A similar concern is to be found in the feminist theology that emerged into public prominence in the 1970s (although feminist interpretations of the Bible date back to 1895, the year in which Elizabeth Cady Stanton published *The Woman’s Bible*). A distinctively feminist hermeneutics does not merely criticize what it sees as patriarchal interpretations. It also seeks to recover the role of women in Jewish and early Christian history, women whose voices have been silenced by the dominant male ideology of the biblical writers.

Still more recently, a number of biblical critics have adopted a post-colonialist approach to the Bible. This starts from the modern experience of Western colonial power from which so many nations today are struggling to emancipate themselves. Once again, this approach not only criticizes those interpretations of the Bible that have lent support to colonial domination. It also seeks to destabilize the meaning of those passages within the Bible itself that seem to be shaped by a similar ideology. Such critics might reexamine, for instance, the much-celebrated conquest of the land of Palestine but from a new point of view,

namely, that of the Canaanites whose land was invaded.

What is striking about these developments is that they are leading interpreters back to a new interest in history, since one cannot understand the ideological slant of a text without understanding the social (and thus the historical) context occupied by its authors. This fact has given rise to what is called a new historicism—a revival of interest in the historical and cultural contexts in which texts were produced. Despite the warnings of the New Critics about authorial intent, postmodern interpreters have become interested once again in the role of the biblical authors, but now as social actors in the ancient Israelite or early Christian world. For instance, recent Old Testament criticism has focused on the way in which the writers and compilers of the Hebrew Bible occupied a particular place in Israelite society and were involved in the political struggle to define Israel’s identity.

Incidentally, it was not only Marx who alerted us to the role of ideology in human thought. Postmodern interpreters will also appeal to two other thinkers whom French philosopher Paul Ricoeur famously described as “the masters of suspicion.” These include the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) and the founder of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). These thinkers also warned us about the hidden forces shaping our knowledge, forces that may operate in ways of which we are unaware. Following Ricoeur, this general approach to biblical interpretation has become known as a hermeneutics of suspicion, which balances the hermeneutics of trust with which Christian interpreters have generally approached the Bible.

CONCLUSIONS

There is much more that could be said about the work of postmodern biblical interpreters, which continues to be controversial. For instance, their observations regarding the plurality of possible interpretations raise the question of how conflicting interpretations are to be judged. What are the marks of a better or a worse interpretation? Are some interpretations to be excluded? If so, on what grounds?

At the very least these new developments in biblical study have served to underline the fact

with which we began our discussion, namely, the complexity of the act of interpretation. If we are to take the task of biblical interpretation seriously, we must try to understand this complexity and to think seriously about its consequences. Remarkably, postmodern critics also share some of the concerns of earlier Christian interpreters, particularly those of the patristic and medieval periods. Their work is often marked, for instance, by a strong pastoral concern. They want to uncover not just what the text meant at the time it was written but what it means to its readers today. They also insist that biblical texts have not just one meaning but a variety of possible meanings. Unlike the church fathers, however, postmodern interpreters rarely defend this claim by reference to divine inspiration!

It is too early to say what the Catholic Church's response will be to these trends, although in 1993 the Pontifical Biblical Commission very cautiously endorsed what it described as liberationist and feminist approaches to the Bible. The caution is understandable. At first sight, postmodern critics seem to stand in a deeply ambiguous relationship to the Christian tradition. Insofar as they adopt a hermeneutics of suspicion and call into question the authority of the biblical text, they

might appear to be openly hostile to traditional forms of faith.

On the other hand, there are other aspects of postmodern criticism that have proven attractive to theologians. For instance, by highlighting the role of the reader and her or his interpretive community, postmodern approaches may allow us to interpret the Bible—as Catholics have traditionally wanted to do—in the context of the life of the church. It may be that there are at least some forms of postmodern criticism that the Catholic Church could welcome.

In more general terms, postmodern criticism could be seen as continuing the project embraced by *Divino Afflante Spiritu* and the Second Vatican Council: understanding the Bible as a work of human beings. However much the believer may insist that the Bible is the word of God, this word comes to us only in the form of deeply ambiguous human words. To understand those words requires all the skills of the interpreter and all the insights we can bring to bear. At a time when it might have seemed there was nothing more to say about this most interpreted of texts, postmodern writers have opened up new possibilities for understanding the Christian Scriptures. The history of biblical interpretation is clearly far from over.

THE
OLD TESTAMENT

THE BOOK OF GENESIS

Joan E. Cook, S.C.

INTRODUCTION

Genesis is a story about beginnings: of the universe, of humans, of joys and sorrows, successes and failures. The book focuses on the relationships between God and people as well as those among different people. These themes are simple in principle, but often complex in our lives. While the themes of Genesis are universal they can be complex because they are expressed in the styles and settings of the ancient Near East. Before we look at the book itself, several introductory points will facilitate our reading of Genesis.

Themes

Genesis introduces several themes that permeate the entire Bible. The first of these is divine causality; that is, the ancient people believed that the deities caused everything that happened in life. The ancient Israelites came to believe in only one God, whose name they eventually learned was Lord or “I AM” (Exod 3:14). They believed that the one God who caused everything to happen took a special interest in them. This divine-human relationship was understood as essential, and it applied not only to the relationship between God and the people, but also among people.

An implication of the importance of relationships is the setting of boundaries between God and creatures, including human beings, and between different creatures. The boundaries involved right relationships among all creatures and also between humans and God. In addition,

boundaries factored into the topic of land and the possession of land. Finally, intimately connected to the theme of relationship is the theme of promise and blessing. The Creator promises to remember and care for all creation, and carries out that promise in spite of the many ways that creatures violate divinely set boundaries.

Ancient storytelling

Another important topic is the way in which ancient people expressed their beliefs and values and told their story: it is quite different from the way we today record our past. We strive to record information with great attention to the details of the event, such as when and where it took place, who was involved, what they did and said. Then we use these details in our efforts to interpret the event we record. But in the ancient world, the project of remembering the past took a different form. People were not as concerned with recording the precise details of an event as they were in probing its meaning. To that end they told stories.

This means of communication was ideally suited to nonliterate cultures, peoples who depended on oral communication because very few could read and write. The stories they told embodied the larger meanings they found in situations and events, and related them in ways their listeners would remember and pass down to their descendants. In fact, we will note throughout Genesis that some events were recounted more

than once, with different points of focus and emphasis. The variations were included because each one added to the meaning of the event, and to the overall picture of the people's relationship with one another and with their God.

Ancient Near Eastern parallels

Several Genesis stories have parallels in other ancient Near Eastern cultures. The best-known of these are the Mesopotamian creation myth called *Enuma Elish*, of which echoes can be seen in the Genesis creation stories, and a Mesopotamian myth about the quest for immortality called the Epic of Gilgamesh, of which traces are evident in the Genesis flood story. Other parts of Genesis include what appear to be allusions to ancient stories. The parallel stories provide plots and themes onto which the Genesis narratives superimposed the ancient Israelites' beliefs. We will comment on *Enuma Elish* and the Epic of Gilgamesh in our discussion of the biblical creation and flood stories.

Documentary hypothesis

As the ancient Near Eastern people continued to tell their stories throughout the generations, the stories took on characteristic themes and motifs typical of their particular geographical localities and political and socioeconomic situations. When the people eventually began to write down their stories, these particularities became part of the narrative. The process of recording the material was a complex one that extended over hundreds of years. In the past 150 years, scholars have studied this question and have developed a theory as to how the first five books of the Bible (also known as the Pentateuch, which includes the book of Genesis) developed into the form we have today. That theory is known as the Documentary Hypothesis. We will look at the contemporary understanding of this theory with regard to the book of Genesis, because an understanding of how the book probably came into its present form is helpful to an understanding of the book's content.

According to the theory, the process of setting the stories in writing took place over a period of several hundred years, from about 1000 B.C. to about 500 B.C. Before that the stories circulated by word of mouth in families and clans. Then around 1000 B.C. when David was King of Israel, he took

steps to unite the twelve tribes into one people. One of those steps was to commission his scribes to write down the people's stories, weaving them into one. This early strand of Genesis (in fact, of the entire Pentateuch) is called J to represent the German spelling of the word Yahweh (Jahweh), the name by which this strand of the Pentateuch refers to God.

After King Solomon's death about one hundred years later, the kingdom David had established broke into two: the northern and southern kingdoms. The southern kingdom, Judah, believed it was the one that remained loyal to God and to the divine promises. The northern kingdom, Israel, set about establishing a new identity, and one of its steps was to rewrite parts of the early J story, inserting new details and substituting different names according to their own regional usage. This strand was woven into the earlier story, and the new strand became known as E because it calls God Elohim.

About five hundred years later, the city of Jerusalem and the entire southern kingdom of Judah endured a traumatic defeat by the Babylonians. They destroyed the temple, which had become the central place of worship. They also imprisoned the king and took into exile many leading members of the Jerusalem community. This defeat represented not only a political act but also the violation of the divine promises that had sustained the people since the time of Abraham and Sarah, over one thousand years before. The upheaval caused the people to rethink the beliefs that had sustained them throughout those one thousand years. The result was two additional strands. The first is known as D and represents the efforts of the people to understand their exile in terms of the message of the book of Deuteronomy: reliance on the covenant, or the formal terms of the relationship between God and the people. The D writers understood the exile as punishment for their own violation of the terms God had set down for the people. They believed that the exile was not a failure of the deity to keep the divine promises, but rather the failure of the people to live up to them.

Finally, a group of priests, also working to understand the meaning of the exile, preserved a record of how they had practiced their religion when it was centered in the Jerusalem temple. They did this because they saw the temple worship

as the norm for public practice of religion. They wanted to preserve this record in the hope that one day they would return to Jerusalem, rebuild the temple, and resume temple worship according to the record they left for future generations. And if the exile did not end, at least there would be a record of how religion was practiced in the “good old days” of temple-centered religion. This strand is called P for the priestly authors who are believed to have written it. These last two groups, D and P, were probably not simply writers but also editors, who worked their strands into the earlier ones and gave the entire Pentateuch the shape we know today.

This summary gives an idea of the stages in the writing of Genesis. We can also categorize the four strands in terms of their characteristic features. We have seen that the writers and editors used different names for the deity: the Yahwist, or J, used the term *YHWH*, the name God gave to Moses at the burning bush in response to Moses’ request in Exodus 3:13-14. The Elohist, on the other hand, used the name *Elohim*, a term that originally meant “gods” and that ancient Israel used in referring to their own God. A shortened form of the word is “El,” another term we find in Genesis. The editors we call P also used the term *Elohim* to refer to the deity.

The four sources have other characteristics, too. The J strand is the storytelling piece, with details that enable us to see, hear, and feel the events described in that strand of the narrative. Its descriptions of the deity are vivid and concrete: they describe God in ways that we humans can identify with, as we will see in Genesis 2. On the other hand, the E strand tends to focus on the transcendence of God, describing the divine presence in dreams and other ways that highlight the mysterious quality of divine presence and action. The D strand tends to be solemn and formal, and to emphasize the cause-and-effect quality of human actions while at the same time recognizing divine inbreakings in unexpected and surprising ways. Finally, the P strand focuses on concerns relating to the public practice of religion: the details of rituals, the place of different people within society, the relationships among different people that are often expressed in genealogical lists. Genesis is composed primarily of the J and P strands; we will point them out in the places where it enhances our understanding of the story.

Ancient literary genres

Another element to consider in our reading of the book of Genesis is the ancient genres or types of writings that comprise the book. The people spoke and wrote according to the conventions of the day. There are three main types of writing that appear frequently in Genesis: myths, sagas, and genealogies. The first two are narrative forms. Myths, in the biblical sense, are not make-believe stories. Rather, they are stories that convey the beliefs and values of the people. We will get a better idea of what this means when we look at the myths in the book. The other narrative genre, the saga, is a story that tells about the past and relates it to the present. The Genesis sagas tell about the beginnings of the world and about events within families. Sagas are predominantly the work of J.

The genealogies appear throughout the book, enumerating the relationships among different generations. These lists are among the latest parts of the book, added during or toward the end of the exile in Babylon to produce a record of who belonged to the group of exiles from Judah. Such a record served several important purposes: it established the record of the family ties of different people, identifying how they belonged to the chosen people. In addition, it supported the claims to the land that became vitally important when the exiles returned to their land and needed to legitimate their claim to it, because others had settled there in their absence. The genealogical lists are the work of P, and they not only identify the relationships among the different people, they also provide an organizing principle for the book of Genesis. We will look at these lists and the information we can learn from them.

By taking note of the three genres—myths, saga, and genealogy—we can understand what the Second Vatican Council document on revelation, *Dei Verbum*, meant in referring to the Bible as the word of God in human language. We believe that the Bible is the word of God, that is, revelation from God. At the same time we believe that it is recorded by human beings who put down the information in the ways people communicated with one another at the time the words were put into writing, according to the genres of the day.

Keeping all these facets in mind—the overall themes of Genesis; the lengthy process of recording

and editing that brought the book to the form in which we know it today; the characteristics of the four different strands J, E, D, and P; the literary forms in which the ancient writers and editors wrote their messages; and the ancient Near Eastern parallel literature—gives us useful tools for understanding the book of Genesis. Now let us look at the contents of the book.

Divisions of the book of Genesis

The Genesis story consists of three parts. The first is the Primeval Story, the story of the earliest beginnings of the universe and of human beings on earth. It is found in chapters 1–11 of Genesis. The second part is the Ancestral Story, the story of several generations who became the ancestors of God’s people. They were Abraham and Sarah; Rebekah and Isaac; Jacob and his two wives Leah and Rachel, their maids Bilhah and Zilpah, and

their twelve sons and one daughter. This part of the story is found in chapters 12–36. The final part of the Ancestral Story focuses on one of Jacob’s sons, Joseph, and his adventures that resulted in the family of Jacob being given a privileged place in the land of Egypt. This part of the story is found in chapters 37–50. We will now begin our reading of the book, looking at each of these three sections and the stories in each in some detail.

As we read, we will keep in mind that we are looking simultaneously at two different historical periods: the time described and the time when the story was written down. The way in which each historical, or prehistoric, episode is recorded reflects not only the people’s understanding of what happened but also the context in which they wrote: the political, economic, and religious concerns that were important at the time, and through which they found meaning in the ancient narrative.

COMMENTARY

THE PRIMEVAL STORY

Genesis 1:1–11:28

The Primeval Story in Genesis 1–11 is the story of the earliest beginnings of the universe and of the human race. It talks of prehistoric times, naming a few places that we can identify today such as the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, but for the most part it recounts stories whose details we cannot identify with precision; often we can find parallel stories and themes in other ancient Near Eastern myths. The Primeval Story consists of two creation stories, followed by several examples of humans who missed the mark in their efforts to live up to the ideals of creation. The best known are the stories of Adam, Eve, and the serpent; the murder of Abel by his brother Cain; the Flood; and the tower of Babel. Each of these stories invites us to look at life’s challenges and how we respond to them as individuals and communities.

The Primeval Story takes us back to that primordial time when God created the world. Today we struggle to weigh different theories of how the universe came into being: whether by divine fiat,

by evolution, by intelligent design, or by some other means that we do not yet understand. Ancient peoples also struggled to understand how the world came into being. They expressed their questions and theories in stories, rather than in the scientific theories we propose today. This difference is an important one to note when we read the Old Testament. Ancient peoples used stories to express their beliefs and values. These stories were not primarily concerned with relating the facts of a given situation; rather, they expressed the contemporary meaning their tellers found in ancient events and circumstances.

The first two chapters of Genesis tell two stories of how the world came into being. The two stories have several common elements: one Creator made the universe by shaping and organizing everything within the confines of time and space to make sure that every creature belonged in it and nothing was destroyed. Among all the creatures, humans were given a special place.

Each of the two stories has distinctive features as well. These give each story its unique character.

1:1–2:4a First creation story

Genesis 1:1–2:4a describes a seven-day process during which the Creator’s word, “Let there be . . .” brings the different elements of the universe into being. The first three days witness the creation of the environment, and the second three days parallel the first, with the creation of creatures to live in the different spaces in the environment. We can chart this parallel in the following way:

Days 1-3	Days 4-6
Light, Day and Night	Greater Light, Lesser Light, Stars
Water and Sky	Fish and Birds
Land and Sea, Plants	Earth Creatures, Animal and Human

Creation begins with a powerful wind sweeping over the waters. Then the activity of each day begins with the formula, “God said: Let there be . . .” Then the narrative reports the specific activity for the day. At the end of the first, third, fourth, and sixth days, God saw that it was “good.” On the sixth day, after all the creatures had been created, God looked over all of creation and saw that it was “very good” (1:31). The description of each day’s work ends with the notation, “Evening came, and morning followed . . .,” then gives the number of the day. The account illustrates the power ancient people associated with the spoken word: to speak was to set an action in motion; thus speech had a sacramental quality insofar as it caused what it signified. The formulas suggest the unfolding of a ritual: creation occurs according to an organized plan by which God first creates the environment, then populates it with creatures suitable for that particular part of the universe.

In verse 6 the dome, or firmament, represents the ancient Near Eastern concept of a divider between the heavens and the earth. We can picture it as a large bowl inverted and set on a flat surface. Everything under the bowl is inside the firmament, and the rest is outside it.

One of the first acts of creation is to harness the waters by assigning them to specific places in the cosmos. This attention to water highlights its necessity for life, and the need to protect and preserve it in the arid ancient Near Eastern climate.

The separation of light from darkness in 1:14 makes it possible to count the passage of time, not only according to days but also to seasons and years. God blesses the creatures of the sea, air, and earth (v. 22), commanding them to be fertile and multiply, assuring the continuity of creation.

The Creator gives a special place to humanity in 1:26. Humans, male and female, are made in the image of God. This is a puzzling statement, for which several explanations have been suggested. For example, we were made with the ability to make decisions, just as God does; or we are the visible “image” of the invisible God in the world. As God’s human counterpart, we have the ability to communicate with God and to ask “Why?” when we do not understand. We also have dominion over all the other creatures. This awesome responsibility involves nurturing and protecting all the other creatures in the universe. The biblical story contrasts with the Mesopotamian *Enuma Elish*, which is full of violence and oppression. In that version the gods compete for the opportunity to create the universe. The victor, Marduk, creates humans to serve the gods.

The seventh day is designated as holy because it is God’s day of rest (2:3). In the ancient world “holy” meant “set aside for God.” Legislation concerning sabbath observance relied on this model of divine rest. It gives us an example for how to spend the day of the week that is set aside for God. A summary statement marks the end of the first creation account.

This first creation account is the work of the P editor. At the time of its compilation the people of Jerusalem were in exile in Babylon as a result of the Babylonian takeover of the ancient Near East. They were searching for the meaning of their exile, and for evidence that God still cared for them and maintained the universe. The insertion of the account, one of the last to be composed, at the beginning of the entire Bible introduces the themes of one God, divine concern for creatures, the dignity of human beings, and the orderly division of creation into different habitats for different creatures, different times for different activities, and the importance of honoring God in difficult times as well as moments of celebration.

2:4b-25 Second creation story

Immediately after the first story of creation, a second one follows. Like the first, it highlights the

special place of humans in creation, relating it in a storytelling mode. We can picture the divine creative actions: shaping things out of clay, planting a garden, instructing the human on how to act in the garden. The breath of God suggests the same kind of energy found in the first creation story: the blowing wind is an invisible force that causes things to happen. God's first act of creation in this account is to shape a human being from the dust of the earth. Again we notice the importance of water: a stream waters all the ground, making it possible to work the soil, and becomes four rivers. Two of these rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates, run through Turkey, Syria, and Iraq.

The prohibition in verse 17 not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil carries with it the threat of death. Death is not explained here; its meaning is already known by the time the story is set in writing, probably around 1000 B.C. The mention of it foreshadows the snake's temptation of the humans in the next chapter, where punishment by death is best explained as an etiological detail, which is an explanation of one of life's realities.

This creation story highlights the importance of relationships: God makes all the other creatures in an effort to provide a suitable companion for the human (v. 18). Only another human can offer that companionship, which finds its ultimate expression in marriage. The solemn wording of verse 24, "That is why . . ." identifies this verse as another etiology, or explanation of the reality of marriage.

This second creation story is the work of J, the storyteller who first collated the ancient stories in an effort to establish a common memory for the tribes united under David. It depicts the work of creation by giving concrete details and describing God in immanent terms. In other words, it depicts God with descriptions that enable us to know God's nearness to us. We can contrast this description with that in the first creation story, which depicts God as transcendent, or far beyond our ability to comprehend. The juxtaposition of the two stories illustrates the belief that God is both transcendent and immanent: infinitely beyond our ability to grasp and at the same time here in our midst.

After the two creation stories, the Primeval Story describes incidents in which humans begin to violate the boundaries the Creator has estab-

lished between God and creatures. Each of the stories describes the way the boundary is violated, gives a divine declaration of that violation and the tendency to evil, and reports divine actions to restore the balance in the relationship between God and humans. Interwoven with these are etiological tales about place names, customs, or human realities; for example, marriage, the wearing of clothes, the reality of shame, evil, and death. At different points throughout the stories, genealogies name those who belong to the different tribes and clans and specify the relationships among them. The names are often eponymous: names of individuals become the names of groups such as Israel, the name given to Jacob in 32:29.

3:1-24 Adam, Eve, and the serpent

The creation story in chapter 2 includes the divine prohibition against eating the fruit of a particular tree that God gave to the first human before the creation of the woman. Here a new creature enters the picture, described only as a snake. No physical description is given until the creature receives the divine punishment for leading the humans into sin (vv. 14-15). At that point the creature loses its legs and is condemned to crawl on the ground, eat dirt, and reach up only to the heels of humans. The creature is a tempter, but is not the devil in the modern sense of that term.

The snake approaches the woman while the man is with her (v. 6), misquoting the divine prohibition by applying it to all the fruit trees (v. 4). She in turn adds to the original prohibition the command not even to touch the forbidden fruit under pain of death (v. 3). The snake's words immediately characterize him as cunning, and the woman's words portray her as eager to observe the divine prohibition. The snake capitalizes on the reason for avoiding the fruit: death will follow. Even though death has not been explained, the story makes clear that the Creator, the snake, and the woman all see it as something to avoid. Here the story resembles other ancient Near Eastern myths that describe the futile efforts of creatures to become immortal. The snake then insinuates that the divine prohibition has a different motive: eating the fruit gives to humans divine knowledge of good and evil; eating the fruit will make the humans like gods.

This is a complex idea: God made the humans in the divine image; the temptation is to eat in order to become more like God by knowing as much as God, ironically, about good and evil. The fruit promises to have more benefits than the snake first mentions: it tastes good, is beautiful, and gives wisdom. The woman eats some, then gives some to the man who does the same. As soon as they have eaten, the snake's promise proves true: they have increased knowledge that shows itself in their awareness of their nakedness. Ironically, the couple now know about good and evil through experience: they have taken it into themselves.

The divine question in verse 9, "Where are you?" underscores the tragic rupture of the divine-human relationship caused by human efforts to usurp divine power. The sin is thus in crossing the boundary that God set for them. They attempt to go beyond the limits of humanity and usurp power that belongs only to God.

The Lord God punishes all three: snake, woman, and man. Of the three, the words to the woman are the fewest, and she is not accused of committing the first sin. That idea does not appear in the Bible until Sirach 25:24: "With a woman sin had a beginning, / and because of her we all die." The punishments are etiologies that explain such human questions as "Why are women and men attracted to each other?" "Why do some people try to dominate others?" "Why do we wear clothes?" "Why is childbirth painful?" "Why is work difficult?" "Why do snakes crawl on the ground?" "Why do we die?" Finally, the divine words recall the second creation story, in which God fashioned the human being from the ground, and reminds Adam that he will return to the earth from which he came. Immediately after hearing this, the man names his wife Eve. Naming her is an act of domination, and at the same time the name he gives her acknowledges the mutuality between man and woman, announcing the beginning of motherhood and Eve's role as the first mother, illustrating the complexity of human relationships.

God punishes the couple, but does not abandon them. Immediately after announcing the punishment, God arranges for their needs by providing clothes for them. In covering their nakedness, God removes their shame. This act of compassion establishes a precedent for what fol-

lows repeatedly throughout the Old Testament: when humans violate the terms of the divine-human relationship God finds a way to restore the balance by providing for the needs of the people.

4:1-16 The first murder

The story of humanity continues with the births of Cain and Abel to Adam and Eve, as God promised after the first sin. The divine acceptance of Abel's sacrifice but not Cain's is troubling, as it appears to show that God plays favorites. We are not told how the brothers know whether their sacrifice is accepted, nor do we know why God rejects Cain's sacrifice. Perhaps the fact that Abel offers the first of his flock, while Cain offers the first of his crops, attests to the high regard for shepherds in the eleventh century, when the story was most likely put in writing. The main point of the story, though, is in Cain's reaction to the divine rejection of his offering. The Lord's speech to him suggests that rejecting Cain's offering does not in any way mean divine rejection of Cain himself. Cain's task is to do what is right, rather than give sin a chance to overtake him.

Cain's response is to kill his brother, violating the divine-human boundary by trying to exercise control over life and death. The divine question that follows in verse 9 reminds us of the question to Adam in 3:9, "Where are you?" Here the Lord asks Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" highlighting the alienation that results from sin (4:9). The divine question holds Cain responsible for his brother Abel's welfare. Cain's contemptuous response illustrates his nonconcern for his brother and his disregard for the deity. The Lord's punishment of Cain is an example of *lex talionis*, the law of retaliation that specifies that the punishment must fit the crime in both kind and degree: it must relate to the wrong that has been done, and must equal and not exceed the amount of wrong that was done. Cain will no longer be able to subsist as a farmer because he has violated the very soil that he works. As with Adam and Eve, God punishes Cain, but does not abandon him, instead marking him for special protection.

4:17-24 Genealogical note

The genealogical note that follows in verses 17-24 shows that Cain has several generations of

descendants who develop different professions important to civilization.

4:25–5:32 Adam’s descendants

The narrative returns to Adam and Eve, reporting that they have additional children. The comment that people then begin to call on the Lord by name is puzzling because it seems to come too early: the Lord reveals the name *YHWH* to Moses at the burning bush (Exod 3:14), long after the time of the first humans. It might reflect the religious practices in the eleventh century, when the passage was most likely set down in written form. It also attests to the beginning of formal acts of worship, associating them with the descendants of Adam from earliest times.

A detailed genealogy records Adam’s line to Noah’s three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. The narrative points out that the people are made with the same characteristics as the first humans: in God’s image, male and female, and blessed. The list in chapter 5 includes many of the same names that we find in 4:17-24, but they are not identical. The lists represent different traditions, both of which were preserved when the stories were written down. The list in chapter 5 involves ten generations from Adam to Noah, a number that is parallel to the number of generations from Noah to Abraham in chapter 10. We cannot know the precise ages of these early people, partly because we do not know how they reckoned time and partly because the ages are unrealistic by modern calculations. Life expectancy today is the longest it has ever been, but does not approach the ages recorded here. The ages highlight the passage of a long time after the creation, during which humans thrived but also sinned. Verse 29 singles out Noah, identifying him as the one who will reverse the curse of the ground that began with Adam in 3:17-19 and continued with Cain in 4:10-12.

6:1–9:17 The Flood

A brief incident about the Nephilim seems to draw on an ancient story no longer known to us. It recounts further actions that blur the distinction between humans and God, with the result that God regrets having created human beings. Ancient people thought the heart was the locus of thinking and decision making. The statement that God’s heart is grieved announces God’s realization that something is out of place among human

beings, and the consequent decision to destroy all life, with the exception of Noah, who finds favor with God (see 5:29). This note introduces the story of the Flood and its aftermath, when creation is destroyed and then re-created.

The earth returns to its primeval chaos when the waters cover the earth, bursting forth from the boundaries to which they were assigned at the creation. And just as a divine wind swept over the waters in the beginning, so the same divine act returns the waters to their boundaries after the Flood. (In contrast, in the Epic of Gilgamesh the gods are terrified, once they see the destructive flood they have caused, and which they are powerless to control.) Once the people are back on dry land, Noah’s sacrifice convinces God never to flood the earth again. God re-creates the people, providing for their needs in the same way as at the creation, with one exception: permission is granted to eat meat as long as the lifeblood has first been drained out. The reason for this stipulation is that blood is the symbol of life, and therefore belongs only to God. The rainbow sign of covenant flashes back to the seventh day after the six days of creation, the day set aside for honoring the Creator. Now God makes the rainbow the solemn sign of the promise never to destroy the earth in this way again. Thus the Flood story ends with the reestablishment of the relationship between God and all creatures.

The repetition of the names of Noah’s sons in 6:9-10 (see 5:32) is the first indication that the narrative includes different versions. These two versions are not separate accounts, as we have in the two creation stories; rather, the two are woven together throughout the story, giving different sets of details that express the two different points of view while telling a single story.

Other signs of two versions are that humanity is corrupt, and that the Creator decides to destroy it according to J in 6:5-7, and according to P in verses 11-13. God instructs Noah to build an ark in preparation for a devastating flood in verses 14-22. The details suggest the P strand of the story: specific measurements and precise instructions. This ark, or box, will have no steering mechanism; God will be its pilot. The J strand does not include instructions for building, but gives instructions for entering it (7:1-3). The J instructions for entering the ark call for seven pairs of clean and one pair of unclean animals, all of which enter two by

two (7:1-5, 8-9), while P reports that one pair of each enters the ark in 7:13-16a. The death of all other creatures appears in 7:21 (P version) and 7:22-23 in the J strand. The report of the end of the flood comes in 8:2b-3a (J) and 8:3b-5 (P). The J strand includes sending out birds to check the progress of the receding waters (8:6-12). Finally, the divine promise never again to destroy the earth by flood appears in 8:21b-22 (J) and 9:11-17 (P).

The P strand relates that God establishes a covenant, or solemn agreement, with Noah and all creatures, never again to destroy the earth by flood. The sign of the covenant will be the rainbow: whenever it appears, God will remember the solemn promise made to Noah. The narrative repeats the word "covenant" seven times, highlighting its solemn significance for God and all creation.

Several narrative elements in the Flood story parallel the first Creation story, illustrating God's creation and re-creation of the world. The chart below shows the similarities between the two stories according to P.

9:18-28 Noah and his sons

A brief genealogical note introduces the vague and puzzling incident between Noah and his son Ham. The story most likely alludes to an ancient Near Eastern story no longer available to us. From an etiological point of view it introduces viniculture and its positive and negative consequences, and also explains the negative attitude of ancient

Israel toward the Canaanites: while it was Ham who violated his father, the narrative condemns his son Canaan for Ham's act.

10:1-32 Table of nations

A genealogy of Noah's sons and their descendants illustrates the widespread populating of the earth after the Flood. The genealogy is primarily the work of P, with narrative parts in verses 8-19 and 24-30 ascribed to J. The list, typical of Genesis, does not differentiate between people and nations, but names seventy descendants of Noah through his three sons. Japheth's descendants settle in the area north and west of the Fertile Crescent; Ham's around the Red Sea, northeastern Africa, and Canaan; and Shem's in the Fertile Crescent and Arabian Peninsula. This list of ten generations from Noah to Abraham parallels the ten generations from Adam to Noah in chapter 5. It does not prioritize any of the peoples, but names all of them as beneficiaries of the covenant God makes with Noah after the Flood.

11:1-9 The tower of Babel

The episode brings together three motifs: the development of technology, the dispersion of humanity throughout the world, and the confusion of languages. It specifies that all the people just named in the genealogy speak the same language, highlighting the unity of all humanity under God. In verses 1-4 we learn of a plan and its implementation by the humans, and in verses 5-8 we see the

<i>Narrative elements</i>	<i>Creation in 1:1-2:3</i>	<i>Re-creation in 7:11-9:17</i>
Wind over waters/earth	1:2	8:1
Watery chaos	1:1-2	7:11-12, 17-20
Separation of water and dry land	1:9-10	8:3b-5, 13a
Birds and animals brought forth	1:20-21	8:17-19
Blessing on animals: "Be fertile"	1:22	8:17
Humankind made "in the image of God"	1:26-27	9:6
Humans brought forth, blessed: "Be fertile"	1:27-28	9:1, 7
Humankind given dominion over animals	1:28	9:2
Provision of food for humankind	1:29-30	9:3
God saw . . . it was "very good/corrupt"	1:31	6:12
Covenant signs of Sabbath and rainbow	2:2-3	9:9-17

Lord's plan and its implementation. The people use their technical skills to try to construct a substantial, very tall building that will reach up into the sky, threatening to blur the boundary between the heavenly domain of God and the earthly dwelling of creatures. The Lord sees what the people are building, and realizes the potential threat to the divine-human boundary. Rather than risk a recurrence of chaos the Lord confuses their language and disperses the people all over the earth, thus populating the entire world and removing the danger that chaos will return. In an etiological note, the narrative specifies the name given to the place: Babel or Babylon. The words are similar to our modern term "babble," or incomprehensible talk, characterizing Babylon as a technologically advanced place where confusion thrives.

11:10-28 Shem's descendants

The narrative returns to the genealogy of Shem from 10:22-31, repeating the names of his descendants and adding information about the ages of the different people. The names are the same through Shem's great-grandson Eber, who has two sons: Peleg and Joktan. The list in chapter 10 focuses on Joktan's descendants, while chapter 11 lists those of Peleg. Five generations after Peleg, Abram and his two brothers Nahor and Haran are born. This point marks a transition in the narrative, away from the universal history of the human race to the particular saga of a single family: that of Abram. The genealogies illustrate Abram's ancestral link to the early generations of humankind, and establish a geographical tie to his ancient home in Ur, near the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers (2:14). The stage is now set for the ancestral story.

THE ANCESTRAL STORY PART I: ABRAHAM AND SARAH

Genesis 11:29–25:18

With the end of chapter 11 the narrative begins to focus on the family of Terah and four generations of his descendants: Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and his two wives Leah and Rachel and their maids Bilhah and Zilpah, and finally Joseph. Chapters 12–36 recount the saga of the first three of these generations, and

chapters 37–50 focus on Jacob's son Joseph. The stories, like those in Genesis 1–11, were passed along by oral storytellers over hundreds of years. They were gradually collected and arranged into the narrative we have today. The different episodes in the saga reflect the concerns of the tellers and compilers, who used the stories to address the issues of their day. In this section we will focus on Abraham and Sarah (11:29–25:18). Then we will consider Isaac and Rebekah (25:19–28:9); next, Jacob and his wives (28:10–36:43); and finally Joseph in 37:1–50:26.

Chapters 12–36, like Genesis 1–11, are organized around genealogical summaries that mark the generations. In what is called the Abraham cycle, or stories about Abraham, a genealogical statement about Terah appears in 11:27 and of Ishmael in 25:12; in the Jacob cycle we find a genealogical summary about Isaac in 25:19; and in the Joseph cycle, a genealogical focus on Jacob appears in 37:2. Throughout these cycles the themes of divine promises of land, descendants, a nation, and blessing form the nucleus of the ancestral stories. Chapters 12–36 are a series of sagas, that is, prose narratives based on oral traditions, with episodic plots around stereotyped themes or topics. The episodes narrate deeds or events from the past as they relate to the world of the narrator. The sagas in these chapters are family sagas, or sagas about the family's past. They incorporate ancient Near Eastern literary conventions such as type scenes and specific family-centered motifs, which we will discuss as we meet them in the sagas.

11:29–12:9 The call of Abram

The transitional comments at the end of chapter 11 set the stage for the Abraham cycle by giving biographical information about Abram and Sarai. First, they link Abram with his ancestors. The narrative reports Sarai's childlessness twice, foreshadowing the importance of that detail in the narrative. The couple takes part in the family's migration from their ancient home in Ur to Canaan, but their travels are cut short when they settle in Haran, near the northernmost part of the Fertile Crescent. There Abram hears the divine commission to leave his family and go where the Lord shows him. In 12:2-3 the divine promise to Abraham includes a great nation and blessing; in fact, the word "bless" appears five times here.