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LIGUORI CATHOLIC BIBLE STUDY



Introduction *to the* Bible

**OVERVIEW, HISTORICAL CONTEXT,
AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES**

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Contents

About the Author vi

Acknowledgments vii

Introduction to the Liguori Catholic Bible Study viii

Group and Individual Study ix

The Living Word of God ix

Lectio Divina (Sacred Reading) xi

The Meaning of “Lectio Divina” xi

The Role of Prayer in Divine Reading (Lectio Divina) xii

Pondering the Word of God xii

Praying Lectio Today xiii

Introduction: Understanding the Background of the Bible xiv

Chapter One: The Bible 1

I. Identifying the Inspired Books 1

A Library Under One Roof 1

Revelation 3

The Canon (Guiding Rule) of the Sacred Scriptures 5

II. Covenant (Testament) 9

A Story of Covenants 9

The Dead Sea Scrolls 12

The Bible as a Religious Book 13

Translations of the Bible 15

Chapter Two: History Before the Exile 17

- I. The Pentateuch (Torah) 17
 - The Book of Genesis* 18
 - The Book of Exodus* 20
 - The Book of Leviticus* 22
 - The Book of Numbers* 22
 - The Book of Deuteronomy* 23
- II. The Former Prophets 24
 - The Book of Joshua* 25
 - The Book of Judges* 26
 - The First Book of Samuel* 26
 - The Second Book of Samuel* 27
 - The Book of Ruth* 28
 - The First Book of Kings* 29
 - The Second Book of Kings* 30

Chapter Three: History After the Exile 33

- I. The Chronicler's History 33
 - First and Second Chronicles* 33
 - The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* 34
 - The Books of Tobit, Judith, and Esther* 34
 - First and Second Maccabees* 35
 - The Ark of the Covenant* 37
 - The Synagogue* 39
 - The Wisdom Books* 40
- II. God Speaks Through the Prophets 42
 - The Prophetic Books* 42
 - Apocalyptic Literature* 47

Chapter Four: Life in Palestine in Jesus' Day 50

- I. The Political and Religious Environment of Jesus' Day 50
 - Judaism Under Roman Rule* 51
 - Religious Leadership* 52
- II. Understanding the Message 57
 - Jesus the Messiah* 57
 - Developing the Message* 59
 - Preaching to All Nations* 60
 - The Canon of the New Testament* 62
 - Jewish Feasts* 64

Chapter Five: The World of the Writer 66

- I. Writing the New Testament 66
 - The Cultural and Political Environment* 69
 - Redaction Criticism* 71
- II. The Sources of the New Testament 74
 - Form Criticism* 75
 - Source Criticism* 79
 - The Synoptic Gospels* 80

Chapter Six: Spreading the Message 83

- I. Understanding Jesus 83
 - The Son of Man* 84
 - The Kingdom of God* 86
 - The Historical Jesus* 88
- II. The Essentials of Jesus' Life 91
 - God's Astounding Love* 92
 - Developments in Scripture Studies* 92
 - The Life of Jesus* 93



Introduction to the *Liguori Catholic Bible Study*

READING THE BIBLE can be daunting. It is a complex book, and many a person of good will has begun reading the Bible only to put it down out of utter confusion. Having a companion is a good thing, and the *Liguori Catholic Bible Study* is a solid one at that. Over the course of twenty-one books, it will point out messages and themes, personalities and events. Along the way you'll see how different books of the Bible arose because of the need to address new situations.

Across the centuries people of faith have asked, "Where is God in this moment?" People of faith ask the same question today, and millions of Catholics look to the Bible to encourage them in their journey of faith. Wisdom teaches us not to undertake Bible study alone, disconnected from the Church that has received the Scriptures as a gift to be shared and treasured. When used as a source for prayer and thoughtful reflection, the Bible comes alive.

What you want to get out of Bible study will dictate what method you use in reading the Bible. One goal of the *Liguori Catholic Bible Study* is to give you and other participants greater familiarity with the Bible and its structure, themes, personalities, and message. But that is not enough. An additional goal is to help you know Christ more deeply by praying with Scripture. God's message is as compelling and urgent today as it has been through the centuries, but we only get part of the message if it's memorized and stuck in our heads. God's word is meant for the entire person, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. We are baptized into life with Christ,

and we are called to live more fully with Christ today. This is done as we practice the values of justice and peace, forgiveness and community with each other. God's new covenant was written on the hearts of the people of Israel; we, their spiritual descendants, are loved that intimately by God today. The *Liguori Catholic Bible Study* is a way to draw close to God, in whose image and likeness we were fashioned.

Group and Individual Study

The *Liguori Catholic Bible Study* series is intended for group and individual study and prayer. Each lesson contains a section for groups to study, reflect, pray, and share biblical reflections among those gathered. By using the books in this series, anyone should be able to join or even start a study group. Beginning with two or three people gathered together in a home or announcing the meeting of a biblical study group in a parish or community can bring surprising results. Also included in each lesson is a second section for individuals to further study each book of Scripture. Many people want to learn more about the Bible but may not know where to begin. This series hopes to provide that beginning and to ensure its continuation until the participants have become familiar with all the books of the Bible.

Since reading the Bible has as its purpose the deepening of one's relationship with God, the study of the Bible could be a lifelong project, always enriching those who wish to be faithful to God's word. Once people have read, understood, and been enriched by a study of the whole Bible, they may begin again, making new discoveries with each new adventure into a comprehensive understanding of the word of God.

The Living Word of God

While thousands of people of every nation squeezed into Saint Peter's Square when Pope John Paul II lay dying, those closest to the pope gathered around his bed. They all say he was conscious to the end, and that one of his last requests was, "Read the Bible to me." Pope John Paul II faced many

challenges in his life, but he built his faith on the words of the Bible and found strength in its message.

Throughout history, the Church has emphasized the importance of becoming familiar with the Bible. In recent times, a love for reading the sacred Scriptures has become evident in the growing number of biblical study groups gathering in parishes and neighborhood communities. In the last half-century, popes have supported and encouraged the reading of the Bible and have given an example of the importance of the Scriptures in their own lives.

In 2008, Pope Benedict XVI convened a gathering of bishops in Rome to discuss the Bible. A gathering of bishops of this type is known as a synod. It consists of bishop representatives from around the world. The pope's primary concern was the challenge of encouraging more Catholics to read the Bible. He instructed the synod's planners to stress that acts of reading, interpreting, and living the words of Scripture are fundamental to the faith life of Christians. The pope said the Bible cannot be thought of as a message of the past but should be read as the living word of God and a challenge for all people today. He declared it is essential for every Christian to develop a personal relationship with the word of the Lord.

Pope Benedict believes the Bible must be seen in its totality as the living word of God. This series will address the entire Old and New Testaments, knowing that the full meaning of the word of God can be grasped only through a total understanding of the books as they relate one to the other. Pope Benedict added that the Bible belongs to the people, not the scholars. This series approaches the study of the Bible as a spiritual adventure, one that attempts to present biblical texts in a readable and understandable format while at the same time treating the Bible with deep respect as the living and inspiring word of God.

One of Pope Benedict's primary convictions is that the New Testament offers the key to understanding the Old Testament and that, as a whole, the Bible necessarily leads to Christ.



Lectio Divina (Sacred Reading)

A BIBLE STUDY is not just a matter of gaining an intellectual knowledge of the Bible but also a matter of gaining a greater understanding of God's love and concern for creation. The purpose of reading and knowing the Bible is to enrich one's relationship with God. God loves us and gave us the Bible to illustrate that love. As Pope Benedict reminds us, a study of the Bible is not only an intellectual pursuit but also a spiritual adventure that should influence us in our dealings with God and neighbor.

The Meaning of *Lectio Divina*

Lectio divina is a Latin expression meaning divine or sacred reading. Many clergy, religious, and laity use this process for their daily spiritual reading, which has as its aim to develop a closer and more loving relationship with God. The *lectio divina* process consists of Scripture readings, reflection, and prayer. It is not only a time for sacred reading but also a time for sacred reflection. Learning about the Scriptures has as its purpose the living of its message, acts that demand a period of reflection on the Scripture passages. This text provides for that period of reflection.

The Role of Prayer in Divine Reading (*Lectio Divina*)

Prayer is a necessary element for the practice of *lectio divina*. The entire process of reading and reflecting is a prayer. It is not merely an intellectual pursuit but a spiritual one. The next books in this series will include prayers that may be used privately or in a group. Some people may wish to keep a journal of their daily meditations.

Pondering the Word of God

Lectio divina is the ancient Christian spiritual practice of reading the holy Scriptures with intentionality and devotion. This practice helps Christians center themselves and descend to the level of the heart to enter an inner-focused quiet space, finding God.

This sacred reading is distinct from other types of reading to obtain knowledge or information. Furthermore, *lectio divina* is more than the pious practice of spiritual reading. Rather, it is the practice of opening ourselves to the action and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. As we intentionally focus our attentiveness and become present to the inner meaning of the scriptural text we are reading, the Holy Spirit enlightens our minds and hearts. We come to the text willing to be influenced by a deeper meaning that lies within the words and thoughts we ponder.

In this space we open ourselves to be challenged and changed by the inner meaning we experience. We approach the text in a spirit of faith and obedience as a disciple ready to be taught by the Holy Spirit. As we savor the sacred text, we let go of our usual control of how we expect God to act in our lives and surrender our hearts and consciences to the flow of the divine (*divina*) through sacred reading (*lectio*).

The fundamental principle of *lectio divina* leads us to understand the profound mystery of the Incarnation: “The Word became flesh” not only in history but also within us.

Praying *Lectio* Today

The practice of *lectio divina* is simple and easy to follow. Four actions are practiced in this ancient tradition.

First, we read a passage from the Scriptures. This is known as “*lectio*.” The word of God is read aloud, and the hearers listen attentively to the spoken word.

Second, the selected passage is prayed with attention as we listen for some specific meaning that comes to mind. The reading is silently reflected upon, which is known as “*meditatio*.”

Third, the exercise becomes active. Pick a word, sentence, or idea that surfaces from your consideration of the chosen text. Is the reading reminding you of a person, place, or experience? If so, pray about it. Compose your thoughts and reflection into a simple word or phrase. This activity is called “*oratio*.”

Finally, quiet yourself and let your thoughts, feelings, and concerns fade away as you consider the selected passage in the previous step (*oratio*). If you are distracted, use your prayer word to help your return to silence. This is “*contemplatio*.” The Scripture is transformed in our hearing as we pray and allow our hearts to unite intimately with the Lord.



INTRODUCTION

Understanding the Background of the Bible

IN USING THE BIBLE AS A GUIDE, it is important to understand what the authors are telling us. The authors and editors had a specific purpose in mind when they wrote and edited the Scriptures. By studying the background of the Bible writers, their period in history, and the political and religious situations in which they found themselves, we can gain an insight into the meaning of the Bible text. Misinterpretation of the biblical texts has led to some tragic mistakes in past and recent history. The Bible has God as its central focus, and it enables us to examine our actions and decisions in relationship to this focus.

Although most readers are anxious to begin with specific books of the Bible, an overview of the Bible such as that found in this book can be most helpful in placing the books of the Bible in their proper context. An overview of Old Testament history and writings will enable the reader to better understand each book being studied in the total context of the Bible. The overview of the whole Bible in *Introduction to the Bible* will also provide a helpful resource when the study group or individual moves on to each book.



CHAPTER ONE

The Bible

I. IDENTIFYING THE INSPIRED BOOKS

On a Sabbath day in Nazareth, Jesus, as a dedicated and pious Jew who worshiped in the synagogue every Sabbath, entered the synagogue to worship with the Jewish community. The worship leader invited Jesus to read the Scripture for the day. Jesus opened the scroll and read a passage from Isaiah the prophet that began with the words: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me” (Luke 4:18). In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus’ public mission to the crowds began with the words that follow. As he rolled up the scroll, he declared, “Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21).

As we approach our study, we know the Bible is the inspired message of God. We refer to the words of the Bible as the word of God. If we approach the Bible with faith that we are reading the word of God, then we can say with Jesus, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.” It is only under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that we are able to read the Bible with faith. Faith comes to us as a gift of the Holy Spirit. God speaks and we listen. When we allow the words of the Bible to shape our lives, we can say with Jesus, “Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.”

A Library Under One Roof

An English literature student learning about the classical literature of the twentieth century purchased a book required for class work that contained sample writings from twentieth-century authors. Between the covers of

this sizable book were poems, short stories, essays, articles, biographies, historical excerpts, and commentaries about each author whose work appeared in the book. A number of editors worked on bringing this book together under one cover. When the student saw the size of the book and reviewed its contents, he remarked to his classmates, “This is not just a book! This is a whole library!”

Welcome to the Bible. Like the literature book mentioned in this opening story, the Bible is not a single book but a whole library of writings from various authors from different backgrounds and various periods of history.

The Word “Bible” Tells It All

“Bible” is essentially a one-word description of the book’s contents. The word has its origin in the Greek word *biblion*, which means “papyrus,” “scroll,” or “little book.” The plural use of the Greek word *biblia*, meaning “scrolls,” or “little books,” comes closer to the name and content of the Bible. The word originates from the Phoenician city of Byblos, where the inhabitants cut papyrus into strips that were dried and used for writing purposes.

The writings of the Bible consist of histories, poetry, wise sayings, prophecies, hymns, personal letters, liturgical prayers, and a number of other diverse types of writing, written over a period of many centuries. The authors of the books of the Bible included farmers, shepherds, kings, priests, prophets, warriors, and slaves. Some were exemplary lovers of God, while others had great difficulty in remaining faithful to the one true God. Like the editors of the student’s book about twentieth-century literature, the editors of the Bible brought the various writings together under one cover.

The Unknown Authors

Most of the writers of the Bible did not identify themselves. Their purpose was to share a message, not themselves. Later traditions identified certain significant manuscripts in the Bible as being written by some well-known people in Israel history. Some of the books attributed to famous prophets, for instance, may have been spoken by these prophets and passed on orally

until someone wrote them down and credited them to the prophet who first spoke them. Tradition sometimes attributed to a book the name of an author who was not the actual scribe. For instance, many commentators believed Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible, but the books contain some instructions for life in the Promised Land that could only have developed after the Hebrew people settled there. Moses may have written some aspects of the story within the first five books, but he most likely was not the author of the final text.

And in the New Testament, some authors did not identify themselves, although later tradition—correctly or incorrectly—attributed certain names to specific books or letters. Some writers would choose the name of a well-known apostle to give the book credence, or they would choose the name because they believed they were passing on the true teaching of that apostle. The Apostle Paul was clearly the author of some of the New Testament letters attributed to him, since he identifies himself at the beginning of several of his letters as the author. On the other hand, he didn't write some of the letters attributed to him.

Revelation

We can know some things about God through our human experiences, but there are other things we cannot know about God unless he reveals them to us. By looking at the beauty of nature, we can experience some idea of God's sense of beauty, but the human mind can never experience the magnitude of God. Everything we experience is like a wisp of smoke in the blazing beauty of God. We need revelation to know about God's dealings with creation. The word of God that comes to us in the Bible is a great gift from God. Jeremiah says, "When I found your words, I devoured them; your words were my joy, the happiness of my heart" (Jeremiah 15:16).

The Message of Revelation

We believe God loves us, that God forgives us when we sincerely seek forgiveness, and that God has concern for all of creation. We believe that human beings are the peak of God's creation and that we will be raised from the dead and live in eternity. We believe all of these ideas about God and creation, but we need revelation to support these beliefs. When we read the inspired word of God, we have the security of knowing that God does indeed love us and has concern for us.

Revelation, however, goes a step further. Revelation reveals to us some deep mysteries about God. It reveals that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are one with God the Father. When we speak of mystery in the Scriptures, we are not using the word in the sense of a murder mystery or some similar sense, but we are using it in the sense of something unknown and not able to be understood with our human mind. Since mystery in this sense is beyond our human ability of understanding, revelation is the only way we can know about it. Even though God has revealed it, understanding it is still a mystery. Mysteries are also different from problems. If I owe someone five dollars, I solve my problem by paying my debt. Understanding myself or someone else may be an attempt to solve a mystery. We sometimes hear the expression, "It is a mystery to me why he acts that way." In this case, we are not trying to solve a problem alone but seeking to understand someone.

Although God is pure spirit and neither male nor female, the members of the early Church followed the trends of their own time and culture, which centered on the male. It was a patriarchal society. In the culture of Jesus' day, they would mostly choose the male image of Father as the parent image for God, although there are some hints in the Bible of a feminine side of God. Isaiah the prophet portrays God as speaking to those inhabiting Jerusalem and writes: "As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you" (Isaiah 66:13). Jesus uses a similar image of comfort for the people of Jerusalem when he laments over Jerusalem, saying, "I yearned to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her young under her wings, but you were unwilling" (Matthew 23:37). Since the New Testament had to

make a distinction between the first and second person of God, the title “Father” is used far more often for God in the New Testament than in the Old Testament. The people of the Old Testament had no idea of the Trinity.

Public revelation ended with the last book accepted into the Bible. We no longer have public revelation, which means a revelation given to a community and declared inspired by the authority of that community. If a person has a vision of God and tells us that God expects us to pray a certain prayer each day, we have no obligation to follow such a revelation. Private visions may bring a revelation for the person who receives it, but it is not public revelation. We are not obliged to follow it as the word of God for us. The truth of private revelation must also be tested against public revelation. If someone claims that God has revealed something that is contrary to public revelation, we must reject the so-called revelation as false.

The Inspired Authors

When the authors wrote the manuscripts accepted as inspired in the Bible, they had no idea that they were writing sacred Scripture. God did not lean over their shoulder and whisper, “Take a message!” The writers wrote according to their style, their historical circumstance, and their openness to the inspiration of God. Some authors of the Bible claimed that God spoke to them directly or through a heavenly messenger, while others claimed they had thoroughly investigated what they heard passed on to them by the community. It was up to religious authorities to determine which books belonged in the Bible.

The Canon (Guiding Rule) of the Sacred Scriptures

“Canon,” a Greek word, refers to a rod or rule used for measuring. The use of the word “canon” for the books of the Bible provides a measuring rod to determine which books belong to the Scriptures. The measuring rod for the Bible depended on the reverence and usage given by the community to certain religious manuscripts. A specific religious authority investigated the community usage of particular books and determined which books or manuscripts were to be accepted as inspired.

During Old Testament times and into the New Testament period, there were a number of manuscripts about God's dealings with his people. Some were confirmed as belonging to the canon of the inspired Scriptures, others were not. Declaring which manuscripts belonged to the canon of the Scriptures guided the faithful about the inspired word of God. In short, the Bible is a collection of the books and manuscripts that religious authorities determined to be inspired.

The Language of the Books of the Old Testament

Since the original authors of the Old Testament were Hebrews, the largest portion of the Old Testament was written in the Hebrew language or an Aramaic dialect closely related to Hebrew. All the books and manuscripts in the Bible existed for a long period of time before editors gathered them into a single collection. The identification of which books belonged in the Bible had to wait until a later date.

In the sixth and fifth centuries before Christ, the writings of the Old Testament were gathered together, comprising only books written in Hebrew. Still, at that time, there were no official statements declaring they belonged to sacred Scripture, but the Hebrew people accepted them as central to their worship and way of life. The people of Israel had commonly accepted some readings, hymns, laws, and forms of worship as inspired, believing that they came directly from the words of God, such as the commandments God gave to Moses.

When Alexander the Great conquered a large portion of the known world in the fourth century before Christ, he spread the Greek language and culture throughout his empire. The Israelites who lived outside Palestine became assimilated into Greek culture while preserving their Jewish beliefs and practices. The mixture of Greek culture with other cultures came to be known as Hellenism. Some commentators referred to those Jews who lived outside of Palestine and who assimilated some aspects of Greek culture as Hellenistic Jews. Many of them could no longer speak Hebrew. This caused a problem for those who wished to remain faithful to the history and customs of Judaism as found in the sacred Scriptures.

With the loss of the ability to speak Hebrew, it became apparent that a translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek was necessary. This translation began around 250 years before the birth of Jesus. The work eventually gained the name of the Septuagint, Greek for “seventy.” Tradition says that seventy-two scholars, working independently of each other, arrived at the exact same translation. This legend naturally led to the conclusion that God had guided this work and that it was authentic. The Septuagint added a number of Jewish historical and religious writings that were not part of the original Hebrew Bible and which, although held in high esteem, were judged by Jewish scholars ninety years after the birth of Jesus as not belonging to the inspired Hebrew Scriptures. Greek-speaking Christians, however, accepted these writings as inspired and therefore belonging in the Bible.

The Language of the Books of the New Testament

Many of the authors of the New Testament wrote their manuscripts mostly in the Greek language commonly used in their day. This made the Greek Septuagint an important source of Old Testament Scriptures for the writers of the New Testament. The New Testament includes many clear references to the Old Testament and a number of subtle and obscure references often missed by the ordinary reader. The value of commentaries on the New Testament books is that they can uncover some of these obscure messages.

The Apocrypha and Deuterocanonical Books

In relation to the issue of the books of the Bible not written in Hebrew, the word “apocrypha” (“hidden”) was first used by Saint Jerome when he translated the Bible into Latin. His translation is known as the Latin Vulgate. Apocrypha may have indicated that certain writings would remain hidden or not understood by the uneducated reader. Jerome did consider the books found only in Greek in high esteem when he included them in his translation, although he did not specifically include them in the inspired Scriptures.

The Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century eventually led

most Protestant Christians to refuse to accept the apocrypha as belonging to the inspired Scriptures, since many believed that only the Hebrew writings of the Old Testament truly demonstrated the faith of Israel. The Church's Council of Trent declared in 1546 that these books were deuterocanonical (doo-ter-oh-can-ON-i-cal), which meant they belonged to a second canon of sacred Scripture, which also meant they were held by Catholics to be the inspired word of God and worthy of being read during worship. The term "protocanonical," which means the first canon, is used to designate the books found in the Hebrew Bible, and deuterocanonical refers to manuscripts found in the Greek Septuagint translation. The writers of the New Testament depended on the Greek Septuagint translation of the Old Testament, which contained books that would later be referred to by most Protestants as the apocrypha.

Some editions of the Bible include text from both deuterocanonical and noncanonical Scriptures in a single section designated "Apocrypha." This arrangement can lead to confusion between the otherwise distinct terms "deuterocanonical" and "apocryphal." Some books read in the early Church period by some members of the Church were not accepted as canonical and are termed apocryphal by the Roman Catholic Church. These books are often included under the heading of apocrypha in Protestant translations.

The deuterocanonical books—known as the apocrypha in Protestant Bibles—are Tobit, Judith, the Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), Baruch (including the epistle of Jeremiah), 1 and 2 Maccabees, and additions to the Books of Esther and Daniel, such as the Prayer of the Three Hebrew Children, Susanna, and Bel and the Dragon.

The Number of Books in the Bible

The Roman Catholic Church and Eastern Christianity include seventy-three books in their Bible, while Protestants include sixty-six books in their Bible. As mentioned above, most Protestant denominations do not accept the deuterocanonical books in their Bible. As a result, the Old Testament texts accepted as inspired by the Roman Catholic Church and Eastern Christianity contain forty-six books, while most Protestant

Bibles contain thirty-nine books in the Old Testament. All of Christianity in general accepts the twenty-seven books of the New Testament as the inspired word of God.

Review

- ✠ What do we mean by the canon of the Scriptures?
- ✠ What languages are the source languages of the Old and New Testaments?
- ✠ What do commentators mean when they speak of the “apocrypha?”
- ✠ How many books are contained in the Protestant and Roman Catholic Bibles?

Reflection

- ✠ The canonicity of the Bible tells us which writings are accepted as inspired. How can this help you in reading the Bible?
- ✠ The Old and New Testaments speak of God’s dealing with people from ancient times to the present. What can the reading of the Bible teach you about God?

II. COVENANT (TESTAMENT)

The Gospel of Luke tells us that Jesus, at the Last Supper, took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, “This is my body, which will be given for you; do this in memory of me”(Luke 22:19). He then took the cup and said, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which will be shed for you” (Luke 22:20). With this, the Christian covenant with God began, a covenant sealed by the Body and Blood of Jesus.

A Story of Covenants

The story of the Bible is a story of covenants made, covenants broken, covenants renewed, and a new covenant of Christ’s Body and Blood. The central

component of the Bible is the covenant. In the Bible, a covenant designates a relationship and agreement based upon shared commitments that normally entail promises, commitments, and rituals. “Testament” and “covenant” can be used interchangeably. A covenant may involve a situation where a superior party establishes the terms of an agreement and a lesser party who agrees to obey this authority, or an agreement between equals who are mutually compelled to observe its stipulations.

The Old Covenant (Testament)

In the Hebrew Bible, God initiates a covenant with Israel. God, in this case, is the superior party who establishes the terms of a covenant with the lesser party, namely the human beings he created. There are several covenants between God and the Israelites in the Old Testament. A major covenant of the Old Testament took place on Mount Sinai where the one true God promises to be the God of the Hebrews, and they vow to obey him. Because God mediates the covenant through Moses, it is called the Mosaic covenant. It is also referred to as the Sinai covenant, since it was given to Moses on Mount Sinai. In breaking a covenant, the people would sin seriously and incur God’s wrath. The people believed that when the nation broke its covenant with God, God would punish them, not to destroy them but to cleanse them and bring them back to living in accord with the precepts of the covenant. No matter how many times or how gravely the people break a covenant with God, God will always remain faithful to the promises of the covenant and wait for the nation to repent and become faithful to the covenant once again.

The New Covenant (Testament)

Because of the sinfulness of the Judeans, Jeremiah predicted that God would make a new covenant with God’s people. For Christians, the Mosaic covenant came to be known as the Old Covenant, and the covenant given by Jesus became known as the New Covenant. Since the word also means “testament,” this naturally led to the covenants receiving the titles “Old Testament” and “New Testament.” To Jews, of course, there is no Old Testament, since they do not accept the New Testament of Jesus

Christ. To Jews, the Mosaic covenant is as relevant today as it was when Moses received it.

Some, in consideration of the sensitivities of the Jewish people, attempt to refer to the Old Testament as the “Hebrew Scriptures” and to the New Testament as the “Christian Scriptures,” but in light of what has been said about the deuterocanonical books in the Catholic New Testament, Catholics cannot refer to the whole Old Testament as the Hebrew Bible, since Catholics accept certain books as canonical that Jewish scholars rejected ninety years after the birth of Jesus.

The Size of the Old and New Testaments

The Old Testament is three times longer than the Christian Scriptures because it covers more time. The Old Testament tells of God’s dealings with the people of Israel for about 1,500 years. The New Testament covers less than a hundred years and speaks of God’s dealings with the people through Jesus Christ, his teachings, and the application of his message to life after his resurrection. For the Christian, however, the Christian Scriptures (the New Testament) are far more important than the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament). The New Testament tells the Christian how he or she should respond to the fact that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, became human, died, and rose for us. Without the message of the New Testament, Christianity would not exist. We Christians live in the New Testament era.

The Importance of the Old Testament to Christians

Judaism and Christianity are historical religions. The history of the Jewish people is a history of God’s activity among the Chosen People of Israel. The history of Christianity is a continuation of God’s activity in the world through the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Jesus himself was a Jew who cherished the history of the Hebrew nation from the beginning of creation to his own lifetime. Since Christianity centers its faith on Jesus the Christ, it is important to understand the biblical stories, prophecies, and wisdom that influenced his life and message.

Jesus Came to Fulfill the Law

The Christian who reads the message of the Hebrew Scriptures actually approaches it in a different manner than the Jewish reader who does not accept that Jesus is the Christ. For Christians, the Hebrew Scriptures reached their fulfillment in Jesus, the long-awaited Christ who arrived and brought a new meaning to the Hebrew Scriptures. The believing Jew reads the Hebrew Scriptures with a view to some fulfillment yet to take place. Jesus himself told his followers that he did not come to destroy the law but to bring it to fulfillment. For Christians and Jews alike, the Hebrew Scriptures bring spiritual nourishment and insight. A study of the Old Testament for Christians brings a deeper understanding of the New Testament and an insight into understanding the person of Jesus, who was a good and dedicated Jew.

The Dead Sea Scrolls

Until 1947, the oldest known copies of the Hebrew Scriptures were referred to as the Masoretic Texts, which dated to the ninth and tenth centuries after the birth of Jesus. One day, a Bedouin boy, while tending his flock of sheep, threw a stone into a cave at Qumran on the northwest shore of the Dead Sea and heard pottery shattering inside. His random tossing of a stone into a cave had an astounding impact on Scripture studies. Upon investigation, he found clay jars containing leather scrolls hidden in the cave. Scholars later examined the site and discovered almost a thousand manuscripts from the Hebrew Bible. Other texts found in the caves disclosed the existence of a monastic type of life for a group known as the Essenes. Researchers believe the scrolls may have been copied by members of the Essene community.

The value of the discovery is that the scrolls include the oldest known surviving copies of biblical and extra-biblical documents. The discovery provided an entire library of religious manuscripts dating from about two centuries before Jesus to a century and a half after. The boy's random throw led to uncovering a cache of biblical manuscripts and other ancient

writings stored in ceramic pots more than 2,000 years ago. Besides the abundance of helpful knowledge gained from these manuscripts, the texts verified the reliability of some ancient writings of the Scriptures. Many of them were fragments of Old Testament manuscripts along with some commentaries about the texts. Many included a number of discrepancies found in later copies, but lengthy sections of the Book of Isaiah had little significant change.

The precious finding received the name “Dead Sea Scrolls” because Qumran is near the Dead Sea, which is a little less than 1,300 feet below sea level. The Dead Sea received its name from its large concentration of salt, which makes it impossible for anything to live in the sea. The salt is so dense that people can easily float on its surface. Today, the area is a resort for many who believe that its waters refresh one’s physical and mental health.

The Bible as a Religious Book

In the seventeenth century, the scientist Galileo was condemned to house arrest because he declared that the sun was the center of the universe. Those who condemned him said, among other accusations, that he was teaching lessons contrary to the Scriptures. At the time, many believed the earth was the center of the universe because the Scriptures spoke of the sun, not the earth, standing still. The Bible tells us that, in one of Joshua’s battles, he prayed that the sun would stand still: And “the sun stood still” (Joshua 10:13). Recent popes recognize that Galileo, instead of being a heretic or teaching false information contrary to the Scriptures, was correct about his scientific theories.

In Galileo’s era, people misunderstood the type of literature used in the Bible. The Bible is a religious book, not a scientific or historical one. The Bible teaches salvation history, which involves God’s dealings with his people. Current scholars all agree that the Bible does not intend to make scientific statements or relate exact history. This does not mean there is no history in the Bible, but to understand the Bible, the reader must understand its purpose and the cultural mentality of those who

composed the books in it. The reader must also understand that those who composed the Bible had the commonly held world view of their day, which held that the earth was flat and the sun, moon, and stars rode on a kind of large dome in the sky, moving from one end of the earth to the other in the course of a day.

Inerrancy in the Bible

Jews and Christians alike believe the Bible, as inspired, is free from religious error. As mentioned above, the Bible is not a scientific book, nor does it always present accurate history. It is a religious book with a religious message. This, however, must also be understood: There are some messages in the Bible that are not supported when compared to the Bible's total teaching. For instance, the Book of Job speaks of the grave as being the end of one's existence, but later in time, authors taught about resurrection from the dead. When the Sadducees of Jesus' day challenge Jesus' message about resurrection and declare that it is not found in the Torah, they are expressing a belief held by many pious Jews. Belief in life after death began about 150 years before Jesus' birth.

The reality that some parts of the Bible may seem to be in error points to the human element of revelation, which works two ways. It involves divine inspiration, but it also involves the writer, the one who receives this inspiration. Every biblical passage must be in agreement with the total teaching of the Bible in order to be accepted as free from error.

Religion and Life

The writers of the Bible also lived in a world where there was little or no separation of religion from the daily rituals of life. Their eras differed from ours. Pagans believed in many gods, while Jews and Christians of the biblical era believed in the one true God. In contrast to the modern era, there were no atheists. For Jews and pagans alike, everything that happened was related to a divine being. Some believed the gods caused storms, famines, plagues, and a number of challenging aspects to life. Jews and Christians, however, realized that the false gods were not gods at all. They did not exist. The one true God was the one who controlled

creation and guided and protected them. In refusing to believe in many gods and keeping faith in the one true God, even in the midst of trials, Jews and Christians were unique in their world. Their history was a religious history, a true history of salvation. Their God was with them in good times and in bad.

In reading the Old Testament, one must beware of viewing God as stern or wrathful. We read that the God of the Israelites punished the Chosen People, not to destroy them but to help them recognize their need to be faithful to the covenant. God admonished them, supported them, punished them, led them in battle, parted the sea for them, and loved them. There are a number of passages that present God as compassionate and loving, one who longs to take the people and embrace them as a mother hugs a child.

For Christians, the Bible is a long journey that reaches its fulfillment when the “word became flesh and dwelt among us.” The Son of God came into the world to bring us salvation that came as a result of his passion, death, and resurrection. That is really what the Bible is all about: God’s desire is that we worship the one true and loving God, and that we love as Jesus did.

Translations of the Bible

A trip to a bookstore will soon reveal to the seeker of a good translation of the Bible that the shelves contain many translations, leaving the reader to wonder which is the best translation and why there are so many. At various periods of history, scholars have translated the Bible into practically every known language. The reason for different translations in English is that the understanding of certain words change. For instance, when the older Roman Catholic Bibles were translated, people used “thee” and “thou” for “you” in daily conversation. As a result, the translations of Catholic and Protestant Bibles had Jesus using “thee, thou,” and other words of old English spoken at the time of the translations. The original authors of the Bible manuscripts wrote in the common language of the people of their day. Today’s translators use the vocabulary and idioms of

everyday speech found in modern society. Added to this is the fact that scholars have discovered more exact translations of certain words used in the original manuscripts.

For Roman Catholics, the translation proclaimed from the pulpit is from the *New American Bible*, whose revision was completed in 2010. The title page of the *New American Bible* says the book was “translated from the original languages with critical use of all the ancient sources.” It is a scholarly and more easily understood presentation of the biblical manuscripts.

Review

- ✠ What does the word “Bible” tell us about its contents?
- ✠ What is the value of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and where did they get their name?
- ✠ What is the importance of knowing that the Bible is basically a religious book with a religious message?
- ✠ What do we mean when we say that religion and life were one in ancient Israel?

Reflection

- ✠ Jesus gave us a new covenant in the Eucharist. When you celebrate the Eucharist, are you aware that you are recommitting yourself to a new covenant with Christ?
- ✠ The Bible is a religious book. What are some spiritual messages you can recall from reading the Bible or listening to the Bible being read?