

Catholic

UPDATE

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THE WHOLE BIBLE AT A GLANCE

ITS 'GOLDEN THREAD' OF MEANING

BY VIRGINIA SMITH

When we open the Bible, we may fall into a faulty way of thinking: “It looks like a book and feels like a book. Therefore, the Bible is a book.” We leap to this conclusion because our Bibles today are neatly bound between two covers, but that wasn’t always the case.

Originally, the manuscripts that would make up the Bible were painstakingly inked onto scrolls of parchment or papyrus. In medieval times, the sacred Scriptures were hand copied in monastery scriptoriums. It was clear to our predecessors in the faith that they were dealing, not with a book, but with many books. The Bible is a collection of books or a little library.

FINDING OUR WAY AROUND THE LIBRARY

Based on our experience with other libraries, we’re aware that not all books are alike. A typical library contains prose and poetry, biographies and essays, novels and histories, reference books and comic books.

The little library called the Bible contains a number of different literary forms or types of literature: from lyrical poetry of the psalms to legal codes of Leviticus, from practical letters to early Christian Churches to the imaginative vision of Revelation’s apocalyptic style.

We’re accustomed to finding books of a literary type grouped in one area of the library. While that isn’t always true in the Bible, it quite often is. There are four major groupings of Old Testament books: (1) Pentateuch or Torah, (2) Historical Books, (3) Prophets, and (4) Writings or Wisdom Literature. The titles found under each heading are, for the most part,



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Covenant appears 289 times in the *New American Bible*. From Genesis to Revelation, covenant is the golden thread weaving in and out through the Bible's many books.

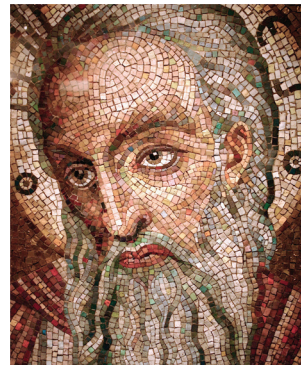
The Church has long encouraged us to seek a broader, deeper understanding of biblical writings, what Scripture scholars call the *sense* of Scripture. When we look at covenant that way, it becomes obvious that God has always desired humanity to enter freely into an ongoing relationship of love with him. As Catholics, we don't take the prehistorical chapters of Genesis (1—11) as literal history. Prehistory is the period before written records when the verification of certain episodes (creation, the flood, the Tower of Babel) is difficult if not impossible to establish. However, great truths that have had profound impact on every generation throughout salvation history are found in these accounts. We learn that creation is good and we were brought into being by a loving God, a God who gifted us with free will—a gift that God never reclaims, even when we misuse it through sin.

We see that God has no interest in a race of robots, preprogrammed creatures who obey him mechanically. God wants his people to choose him freely, serve him without coercion, and love him with open hearts. This is why he enters into covenant relationship with humankind.

The covenant is, first of all, God's gift of love to us. We can enter a covenant with God only because God lovingly and freely offers it to us. Such a covenant was implied at the creation of humanity. We are invited and enabled to respond lovingly and freely to God's offer. A covenant cannot be imposed; it must be freely accepted by both parties. God's proposal of such an agreement, together with his people's acceptance and subsequent attempt to live it, forms the golden thread that binds all of salvation history—Old Testament and New, 2000 BC and AD 100—and is found wherever the chosen people travel.

THREE TOWERING FIGURES

One frequent difficulty in reading Scripture, especially the Old Testament, is the vast cast of characters. People come and go at a great rate, many never to appear again. Do we really need to know all these people? Some are relatively unimportant, but others are very important, and a few are crucial to our understanding of God's relationship with his people. In the Hebrew Scriptures, three figures loom large:



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