



Third Sunday of Easter May 4, 2014 A

The Old Testament: Part One

- How the Bible came to be
- Divine Inspiration
- Interpretation
- Why Catholic bibles have seven extra books
- How the Canon of the Bible was decided

Even though many more Catholics are reading the Bible now in contrast to the era before Vatican Council II (1962-1965), there are still all too many who do not read the book, especially the Old Testament. Frankly, I can easily see why many people might become discouraged, confused, and even shocked, when it comes to reading the Old Testament.

While there are many stories and passages in the Old Testament that edify us and give us spiritual nourishment, there are also lots of stories that can scandalize us and cause us to wonder why God allowed some things to happen—or worse still, why he ordered people to do certain things. Many of us may wonder why there is so much violence in the Old Testament.

I am hoping that this series of articles will be helpful to those of you:

- who may have read parts of the Old Testament and find yourself shocked by some of the stories and events.
- who have not read any, or hardly any of the Old Testament.

Needless to say, I will not be able to answer all of the questions you may have about the Old Testament. But, hopefully, I can shed some light on some of them and on difficult texts.

How the Bible came to be

The Bible, as we have it today, is the result of a five-step process, briefly described below.

Saving events. The Bible grew out of a series of saving events during which God entered human history. Some of these key events were: the call of Abraham, Exodus, Sinai Covenant, entrance into the Promised Land, establishment of a monarchy in Israel, Babylonian Exile, return of the exiles, Rededication of the Temple,

coming of Jesus, his preaching and miracles, his Death, Resurrection and Ascension, coming of the Holy Spirit, and beginning of the Church. All of these events happened within a community. Gradually, they were seen as events in which God revealed himself to his people and invited them to enter into a covenant relationship with him.

Oral tradition. The second stage in the formation of the Bible is called oral tradition. Through it, the *memory* and the *meaning* of the saving events were transmitted from one generation to another. Story-telling, poems, songs and rituals were all part of oral tradition.

We may wonder about the accuracy of oral tradition. How do we know that the stories told and retold were faithfully transmitted? Oral tradition is reliable because it is the product of the community. Thus, for example, if a child in the early Christian community prayed: “Our Father, who art in heaven, Harold be they name,” such a mistake would not be passed on because the community would correct it.

Written tradition. Eventually, parts of the oral tradition were written down in a variety of ways: stories, sayings, poems, songs and narratives. But the fact that some things started to be written down did not mean that oral tradition ceased. It didn’t. Both continued side by side.

Edited tradition. This stage involved gathering together pieces of the oral and written tradition and formulating them in such a way that they spoke to the lives of the people who lived during the period when the editing process occurred.

Canonical tradition. This refers to the process by which some sacred writings became a book of the Bible, while some did not. More on this step later in this article.

One other point to note is the fact that *the Bible was first divided into chapters* in the early part of the thirteenth century by Stephen Langton. Division into verses was introduced by a printer, Robert Estienne, in 1551. So if we made a reference to “John 3:16” prior to the twelfth century, people would not know what we were talking about.

A Book divinely inspired

What do we mean and not mean when we say that the Bible is divinely inspired? “Inspiration” is a word that we use rather loosely today. We speak of poetic and artistic inspiration and inspired speeches and sermons. What is meant by *biblical* inspiration? The word “inspiration” comes from the Latin word “*inspirare*” which means “to breathe upon” or “God-breathed.” The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that biblical inspiration is an action of God upon human authors to write only what God wants written. When St. Paul says that “all scripture is inspired by God” (2Tim 3:16), he means that these sacred writings have been breathed into by God, in-spirited by God, are the product of the breath or spirit of God.

Inspiration does not mean “verbal dictation”—God whispering into the ear of the human author telling him what to write. The human authors were most likely unaware that they were being inspired. Sometime later, the faith community came to recognize certain writings as the inspired word of God.

In an effort to explain biblical inspiration, some writers compare the *Divine Word* of God in the Bible and *Incarinate Word* of God that became flesh in Jesus. In his book *Set My Exiles Free*, Fr. John Power writes: “*At the incarnation, Mary is overshadowed by the power of the Most High; in inspiration, the writer is overshadowed by the Spirit of God. Christ has divine and human parentage—God and Mary; the Bible has divine and human authors—God and inspired men. God made use of Mary’s human nature to bring forth the Word-made-flesh; similarly, God makes use of the author’s human talents to create an inspired book.... No wonder that some of the early Christian writers spoke of two incarnations of God’s Word, one in human nature, the other in human language*” (p.21).

Why Catholic bibles have seven extra books

The Hebrew Bible written by Jewish authors/editors contains 39 books. When this Bible was translated into Greek for Greek-speaking Jews who lived outside of Judah in the third and second century B.C., seven other books were added, resulting in 46 books of the Old Testament. The Greek translation of the Hebrews became known as the *Septuagint* because it was believed to have been written by 70 writers.

The seven additional books are Judith, Tobit, Baruch, Wisdom, Sirach and 1 & 2 Maccabees—often called the *deuterocanonical* (second canon) books because there was a certain reluctance by the Church to admit these books into the Canon of Scripture. Furthermore, the Greek edition has larger versions of the books of Esther

and Daniel. While the early Christians primarily used the *Septuagint* version of the Hebrew Scriptures, many Jews did not.

Many centuries later, when Protestant Reformation leader Martin Luther translated the Bible, he used the Hebrew canon of the Old Testament which did not contain the seven above-mentioned books. The Catholic Church continued to retain the Septuagint version of the Old Testament, believing all 46 books to be divinely inspired. The seven books are recognized by Protestants as sacred books and are included at the end of some Protestant Bibles. Protestants call the deuterocanonical book *apocrypha*, which ascribes the writings to human authorship rather than divine inspiration. The primary distinction in modern times is that they are used liturgically in the Roman Catholic Church but not by the Jews and Protestants.

The Vulgate Bible. In the fourth century, St. Jerome translated the Greek Bible into Latin for the “common people” of the Roman Empire who could only speak and read Latin. The Latin word “*vulgus*” means common people.

How the Canon of the Bible was decided

How did the Church decide which books should be accepted into the Canon of Scripture? The term “*canon*” means measuring stick. A *canon* is a measuring stick or ruler used to decide what does and does not fit. Originally, when applied to the Bible, the term *canon* referred to the measuring stick by which a sacred writing was judged to be divinely inspired and accepted or not accepted as a book of the Bible. Today the term *canon* refers to the 73 books of the Bible, the collection of sacred writings by which the Church’s faith can be measured.

How was the Canon of Scripture decided? In his book *Introduction to the Bible*, Stephen Binz writes: “*It was not at all clear to the people of God which of the many writings of the Israelite and Christian communities were to be accepted as the word of God. The books that eventually became part of the Bible had no particular glow that set them apart from the rest. Even the need for a distinctive collection of books was not at all evident to the Jewish and Christian communities for a long time*” (p.68).

How did Church leadership discern which books to admit into the New Testament canon? In general, we can say that the decision was based on which books best captured the vision and message of Christ, which books best nurtured the faith of the people. More specifically, a book was accepted into the Canon of the New Testament when it met four standards:

- *Apostolic origin.* The book had to reflect the teaching of the Apostles and their closest companions.
- *Universal acceptance.* The book had to be accepted by all major Christian communities in the Mediterranean world.
- *Use.* The book had to be used in the liturgical celebrations of the early Christians.
- *Orthodoxy.* The message of the book had to be in harmony with other Christian and Jewish writings.

Knowing these standards helps us to see why early Church readers did not accept some books into the Canon of the New Testament. For instance, the *Gnostic* gospels were rejected because they placed little importance on the suffering and death of Jesus.

The Councils of Hippo (393AD) and Carthage (397, 419AD) were the first Church Councils to list all 73 books of the Bible. The final infallible definition of Canonical Books of the Bible came from the Council of Trent in 1556. The infallible statement came as a response to Protestant reformers who rejected the seven books of the Old Testament found in the Septuagint.

Catholic approach to biblical interpretation

Reading the Bible, especially the Old Testament, can be intimidating. After all, it is no ordinary book. It is more like a small library. It consists of 73 books written in different languages by different authors or different audiences over a period of about 1,100 years. It contains many different kinds of writings such as narrative, poetry, prophecy, laws, to name but a few. The Bible is God's Word and man's word. One must understand man's word in order to understand God's Word. One of the reasons that there are so many divisions within Christianity today has to do with the issue of interpretation.

The historical-critical approach to the Bible. In the past hundred years or so, great advances have been made in biblical scholarship—advances that our Church leaders were slow to embrace. Today, when it comes to biblical interpretation, nearly all mainline Christian churches use what is called the *historical-critical method*.

The method is called *historical* because it focuses on the original historical settings of biblical texts and the historical processes that gave rise to them. It is called *critical* because it applies reason to the texts and uses every means available to better understand what the original author intended to communicate. In short, the *historical-critical* approach to biblical interpretations seeks to get at what a particular text was saying to its

original audience and to make clear its significance *then* and *now*.

One important way that the *historical-critical* method helps our study of the Bible is by distinguishing the *intended meaning* of a text from its *apparent meaning*. For example, the *apparent meaning* of the creation story in Genesis 1 is that God created the world in six days. Scholars applying the *historical-critical* approach to Genesis 1 help us to see that the *intended meaning* is that *God* created the world and that he created it good. The biblical author did not *intend* to tell us *how* God created the world. When Jesus says in Luke, "*Blessed are the poor,*" the *apparent meaning* is that it is a blessing to be materially poor. The *intended meaning* is that God is happy when people place their trust in him.

Take a contemporary news article that begins with the words: "The White House announced today..." An ancient reader or even someone living in a remote village of Africa today would need to understand the meaning of "White House" in contemporary America to understand such a statement.

Biblical literalists. Like us, biblical literalists believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God. What they tend to forget or ignore is that the Bible also has a human dimension, that it was written by human authors who expressed themselves in a variety of ways to communicate their message. People who read the Bible with a literalist mindset run the risk of confusing the *apparent* and *intended* meaning of a particular text. Biblical fundamentalists take a literalist approach to the Bible. They disregard the historical settings in which particular texts were first developed.

Does all of the above mean that one needs to be a Scripture scholar to read Scripture? Of course not. Just as one does not need to be an expert in musical composition to appreciate music, one does not need to be an expert in Scripture to appreciate and benefit from reading God's Word. Yet, just as courses in musical composition will enhance our appreciation of music, so will Bible study enhance our understanding and appreciation of God's Word. It will also save us from misinterpreting it and imposing a twenty-first century western mentality on texts written in another time and place.

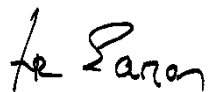
Reading the Bible within the Church. The Church is the mother of the Bible, especially the New Testament. For 2,000 years, she has been meditating and studying the Scriptures. Therefore, we do well to study the Bible with the guidance of the Church and its scholars. We are blessed today to have many easy-to-read introductions to the Bible and commentaries on its individual books.

As we study the Bible, we will discover that the Church very rarely states that “this is the only meaning of a particular text.” What it may sometimes state is that a particular interpretation is misguided or incorrect.

RESOURCE

Inside the Bible – Kenneth Baker, S.J. This very readable book covers each of the 73 books of the Bible under the following headings: Historical context, summary of the story, theology or message, and division of chapters.

Have a blessed week,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr Sarah". The "Fr" is written in a cursive style, and "Sarah" is written in a simple, slightly slanted script.