Reading Your Bible is a magnificent resource and guide for all catechetical ministers who desire to come to know, understand and deepen their familiarity with God's Word in history and in mystery. It is certain to enrich, broaden and transform our catechetical initiatives.

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DIRECTOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION, ARCHDIOCESE OF LOS ANGELES

Concise and comprehensive, this book can go a long way toward taking away fear of the Bible and educating every reader to a deeper, more accurate and less naïve reading of the Scriptures. Catechists and many others will love this book.

—FRANK DESLAS, CSP
PAULIST EVANGELIZATION MINISTRIES, WASHINGTON, DC

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Steve Mueller, PhD has taught Philosophy, Theology, Scripture and Catholic Studies, and helped develop and taught for many years in the renowned Denver Catholic Biblical School. He was formerly editor-in-chief of the monthly periodical for Eucharistic Spirituality Living with Christ and a managing editor for Morehouse Education Resources. He is the current editor for Words of Grace: Daily Reflections & Prayers for Catholics for All Saints Press (www.AllSaintsPress.com).
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Faith Alive Books
Grand Rapids, MI
www.faithalivebooks.com
THE CATECHIST’S GUIDE TO

Reading
Your Bible
a Catholic View

STEVE MUELLER

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The Bible, which we call God’s Word, contains the family stories of how God has come to our world to help us become a new kind of community, living the way God wants us to live. It tells us what God wants to say to us: how much God loves us and wants to be with us, and how we are to live with one another in the community of Jesus’ friends, called the Church. Because it is God’s Word, we read or listen to it as if God or Jesus himself is talking to us. Whether at church or at home, we quiet ourselves and listen to hear its message. When we have made its message our own, we seek to share that message with others through our words and our lives. We are all catechists.
The Catechist and the Bible

“The study of the sacred Scriptures must be a door opened to every believer. It is essential that the revealed word radically enrich our catechesis and all our efforts to pass on the faith. Evangelization demands familiarity with God’s word… which calls for a serious, ongoing study of the Bible, while encouraging its prayerful individual and communal reading… Let us receive the sublime treasure of the revealed word.”

—POPE FRANCIS
The Joy of the Gospel, #175
(November 24, 2013)

In Mark’s gospel there is a curious incident that probably resonates with anyone who has accepted the call to be a catechist for their parish catechetical program. Through his teaching, healing and exorcisms Jesus has attracted much attention and many curious followers, and then one day:

“He called to him those whom he wanted, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons” (Mark 3:13-15).

As they remain with him and accompany him, he begins to teach these chosen disciples in order to prepare them for their eventual sending out. No doubt they thought they would have plenty of time to be with Jesus to learn what he was revealing about God and the kingdom and maybe even learn his techniques for how to teach, heal and even drive out demons.

But Jesus surprises them. After just two short chapters in the gospel, in which the disciples mostly watch Jesus in conflict with the teachers of Israel,
hear him teach in puzzling parables, see him drive out a legion of demons and heal a synagogue leader’s daughter and be rejected in his home town of Nazareth, Jesus sends them out just like he said he would.

What a shock this must have been. I suppose they felt a lot like us when we first began our work as catechists whether for children, youth or adults in our parish programs or in RCIA—apprehensive and nervous because they were just ordinary people, woefully unprepared, without any practical experience or top-notch credentials that would make others listen confidently to them, and scared that they wouldn’t live up to Jesus’ trust in sending them to proclaim God’s good news in a way that might really help others.

But take heart! The disciples went out two by two and succeeded beyond their wildest expectations. Why? The Spirit of God and Jesus was at work in them. Their success was not their own doing, not the result of their information or techniques, but rather stemmed from their attention to Jesus and his message and their relationship with him as his faithful followers.

As catechists we can sometimes forget that what we communicate to others is not first of all faith formulas or answers for defending our beliefs, but rather the truth about Jesus and the relationship that each of us must cultivate with him, who is risen and alive in us and in our midst.

As Pope John Paul II reminded us very early in his papacy in his attempt to renew the catechetical role that we all share as Christians, the real goal of catechesis is not information about doctrine but a relationship to Jesus.

“At the heart of catechesis we find, in essence, a person, the person of Jesus of Nazareth, ‘the only Son from the Father…full of grace and truth,’ who suffered and died for us and who now, after rising, is living with us forever. Jesus is ‘the way, and the truth, and the life,’ and Christian living consists in following Christ…. Accordingly, the definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ: only he can lead us to the love of the Father in the Spirit and make us share in the life of the Holy Trinity.”

—POPE JOHN PAUL II
Catechesi Tradendae, #5

But if by our catechetical efforts we are supposed to put people into intimate communion with Jesus, then we must first learn who he is and be attentive to our own relationship with him. But where and how are we to
discover Jesus, the good news he proclaimed and how we can enter into and maintain a relationship with him?

The answer is the Bible, which is the story of how God desired to enter into a relationship with us humans and how we responded to that invitation. It first tells the story of God’s covenant relationship with the Israelites in what we call the Old Testament (an older English word meaning covenant). Then in the New Testament we discover the renewed covenant relationship that Jesus inaugurates. In sum, the whole Bible is about our relationship with God as members of God’s covenant community. Reading and studying it invites us first to imagine the biblical world which reveals how God wants us and our world to be, and then invites us to strive to make God’s dream for this world into a reality in our lives and communities now.

Reading your Bible is an invitation to enter into God’s world, to encounter Jesus and his message and learn how to see beyond the surface of our ordinary lives into a mysterious world charged with God’s presence and activity. It is a fantastic journey on which you will experience and explore the fascinating world of the Bible and learn about God’s always surprising relationship with humanity.

If you want to take up your Bible and travel its pathways, this Catechist’s Guide to Reading Your Bible will both inform you about the Bible and equip you with the skills needed to read and heed its message. Like any good guidebook, this Catechist’s Guide will help you prepare for your Bible journey into God’s world and make the journey more enjoyable and worthwhile.

Part One, Deciding to Make Your Journey, encourages you to choose this special biblical trip from among the many possible ways you can spend your time. As you progress through this section, you will learn how to overcome your fears, why your Bible is different from other books, and how to approach reading and interpreting the Bible from a Catholic perspective.

Part two, Preparing for Your Journey, helps you get ready for the trip by offering a quick tour through your Bible. This overview explains how the Bible is organized and gives a brief history of the composition and collection of its books. This part of the book also investigates the connection between the biblical authors and their audiences and provides suggestions for possible reference materials to equip you for your journey.
Part three, Making Your Journey, first suggests a practical itinerary for your initial reading journey. This list ensures that you will read every book of the Bible. Then I offer practical helps so that you’ll be encouraged to pick up your Bible and actually read it. I suggest an effective reading method that is “as easy as ABC.” I then describe how you can get help from Scripture scholars to deal with some problems that arise whenever we read the Bible. Finally, since sharing your journey always makes your trip more enjoyable, I suggest a way that you can bring God’s Word to life through small group discussion. At the end of each chapter there are also some suggested questions to use for personal reflection and/or group discussion. The glossary contains some important biblical terms that every catechist should be familiar with.

As we all learn in our work as catechists, although there are plenty of dumb answers, there is no such thing as a dumb question! Since I do not know exactly what your specific questions might be, I hope my Catechist’s Guide to Reading Your Bible will address many of the problems and concerns that many catechists on whatever level they teach and other adult learners (including parents who we must remember are the first and primary catechists for their children!) commonly face when they begin to read and study the Bible on their own or in catechetical programs or in the RCIA.

Finally, reading your Bible is not so much for gathering information for your catechetical teaching but for your own formation—for your growing relationship with Jesus, especially for your ongoing communion with and conversion into Christ. As a catechist, if you do not know Jesus and his message, then you cannot share it with others. But just as Jesus did, we do not just share an abstract message but also ourselves.

As catechists, what those we teach will remember long after they have forgotten our words is our example. As Pope Francis noted, “Jesus wants evangelizers who proclaim the good news not only with words, but above all by a life transfigured by God’s presence” (The Joy of the Gospel, #259). So as you make the Bible message your own and take on the vision and values of Jesus both for your own life and your life with others in the community, you will become Christ for others. No catechist could wish for more.
PART ONE

Deciding to Make Your Journey
What is Sacred Scripture but a kind of letter from Almighty God to us creatures? And surely, if you were resident somewhere else, and were to receive letters from an earthly emperor, you would not loiter, you would not rest, you would not sleep until you had learned what the emperor had written.

Study then and daily meditate on the words of your creator. Learn the heart of God in the words of God, so that you may desire more ardently the things that are eternal, that your soul may be kindled with greater longings for heavenly joys.

May God pour into you the Spirit, the Comforter. May you be filled with God’s presence, and in being filled, be composed.

—POPE ST. GREGORY I (THE GREAT) (d. 604)
Letter to Theodorus, Physician to the Emperor
Let’s face it. For most of us Catholics, the Bible is like a foreign country. We have heard fascinating stories about its people and places mostly from others who have traveled there. We might even have met someone who, like some spiritual secret agent, has been a closet Bible reader for years without ever revealing these undisclosed excursions into Bible country. Although most of us might have at one time or another secretly yearned to make this journey, for various reasons we have never had the courage to do it ourselves.

For years, most Catholics recorded births, baptisms, first communions and weddings in their family Bible but never dreamed of reading it. They had been warned that there were too many dangers in traveling there on their own. “Private interpretation” was especially suspect and dangerous because it could lead directly to heresy and losing one’s faith.

“Therefore, let us go to Him through the open door and not forsake His good works. Be not afraid to dare to read the Scriptures. St. John tells us His Word is like honey to the taste and that it has power to save us. Lastly, when you read it, let it return to your heart, let it take root, let it become your own, let it change your life.”

—ST. AUGUSTINE (354-430) From Confessions (Book 8, Chapter 12)

Despite the warnings, when their curiosity got the best of them, many Catholics decided to read the Bible. But since our modern Bible is bound like a book, they assumed that they should read it from cover to cover, only then to find it obscure, puzzling and often even boring. Like so many other confused and discouraged seekers, many quit after the first few books.

But the Bible has retained its fascination for us. We are a little like St. Augustine of Hippo some sixteen hundred years ago who tells of his conversion experience in his autobiographical Confessions (8.12). Disillusioned by his
superficial lifestyle and yet reluctant to enter into a deeper relationship with God, he heard a child playing chant, “Take and read, take and read.”

Assuming that this meant his Bible, Augustine opened it randomly to a passage from St. Paul’s letter to the Romans (13:13-14), which urged him to cast aside the past with its sinfulness and begin a new relationship with God. Our intuition tells us that something good might happen when we too heed the faint voices we hear prompting us to “take and read” our Bible.

Tourist or Resident?

If the Bible is like a foreign country, then reading the Bible is how you journey there. Just as there are many travel guides and videos to acquaint you with places you would like to visit, there are many helpful introductory books and study programs to help you understand more about the Bible. But watching a National Geographic video from the comfort of your living room is never like being there in person. Likewise, no amount of secondhand knowledge about the Bible can substitute for the firsthand experience of reading it.

“Sacred Scripture changes the heart of whoever reads it from earthly desires to embracing spiritual things. In some way it grows with the persons reading, so that for uninstructed readers it is a review, and for well-instructed readers it is always new. Sacred Scripture by the manner of its speech transcends every science, because in one and the same sentence, while it describes a fact, it reveals a mystery.”

—POPE ST. GREGORY I (THE GREAT)
Morals on the Book of Job, Book XX (ca. AD 585)

Your journey to Bible country must ultimately be made in person because what you are seeking is not simply bits of information or good ideas about God. The Bible is not an “infomercial,” selling God like some product you can acquire. It is more like a guidebook for your relationship with God.

Bible reading is different from most other reading you do. Reading the Bible demands that you take more time to pause and examine your familiar world. Only when you do this can you discover the mysterious divine realities that normally go unnoticed. Reading the Bible from cover to cover to get a quick overview of its contents is like taking the whirlwind tour of Europe that provides merely a surface awareness. If it’s Tuesday, this must be Paris!
How different would it be to live in Paris for weeks or months and absorb the experience of being there daily with Parisians! When you journey into Bible country, you do not want to be just a tourist. You want to be a sojourner—a foreigner who enjoys the new place so much that he or she wants to stay there longer and perhaps even become a citizen.

The Bible journey is a unique trip. It is not exactly a business trip, although you will profit from the journey. It is not exactly a vacation, although you will be refreshed and recharged if you go. The Bible journey is unique because it takes you to the center of your faith to meet this mysterious other called God. It is not an outward journey that traverses the geography of the land but an inner journey over the landscape of your heart.

Through your biblical journey, you can refresh your vision of what the world is like, rethink your values and change your behavior because of your relationship with God. Your aim is not just for theology—faith seeking understanding—but for spirituality—faith seeking embodiment. The Bible is the doorway that leads from your ordinary, material, external world to a spiritual, extraordinary, inner one. God stands at the door and invites you (see Revelation 3:20!), but you have to decide to step across the threshold.

**The Bible Journey: Taking Care of Sacred Business**

Whether you recognize it or not, your journey into Bible territory always begins with some agenda. Why do you want to read the Bible and not some other book? There are thousands of books about religion, prayer, spirituality, psychology, history and so on. Why not read one of those? Answering this question for yourself is the first and most important step on your journey.

“You will not see anyone who is really striving after his or her advancement who is not given to spiritual reading. And as to the one who neglects it, the fact will soon be observed by that one’s progress.”

—**ST. ATHANASIUS** (d. 373)

The main business we are all in is that of self-making. Our lifetime is a journey, and this journey shapes and defines us. Self-making occurs also as we relate to others. These relationships help us discover who we are and what
our gifts are. Ultimately, we find our true identity in relationship to God, the divine other who calls us into a special relationship. The Bible is our primary resource for discovering God’s plan for who we are to become.

Like the business and economic activity that dominate so much of our everyday lives, our personal or sacred “business” also requires much time and effort. Just as a business trip has definite goals in mind, your trip through the Bible ought to have some bottom-line payoff. As the American philosopher William James liked to say, religious ideas also need some “cash value.” What is the practical application or usefulness of your Bible journey for your business of self-making, for a better relationship with God and others?

**Bible Reading Can Deepen Your Spiritual Life.**

Since reading the Bible opens up the often neglected spiritual depths of your world and of yourself, it can jump-start your personal spiritual life and help you live out your relationship to God much more consciously. As you notice how and where God is present, you become more spiritually aware and see your familiar world through the eyes of faith. Reading the Bible reveals that the surface appearances of yourself and your everyday world hide a deeper mystery that normally escapes your notice.

**WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?**

Five Concerns That Can Focus Our Approach to the Bible

- **B**asic Beliefs (theology)
- **I**nformation (history)
- **B**eing Together (community, tradition, worship)
- **L**ife Guidelines (moral, spiritual and practical)
- **E**xpressions of Our Relationship to God (prayer)

Just as the disciples discovered Jesus alive after his death, so each of us as Christians has also experienced the living presence of Jesus. This living presence lures us onward into the mystery of the God who surrounds and supports us and desires to relate to us. We recognize God’s presence in the various experiences and events that hint at life beyond our everyday material realities. There is always more than meets the eye! And this “more” is God.
The Bible is your primary handbook for learning how to live in a religious relationship with God. We need first to discover God’s hidden presence and then learn how to remain in effective contact with God, which is what religion is all about. The word religion comes from the Latin word meaning to “re-tie” something. Religion encompasses our efforts to re-tie ourselves to God in the kind of relationship that God wishes.

“Be constant in both prayer and reading. First speak with God, then let God speak with you. Let God instruct you, let God direct you.”

—ST. CYPRIAN OF CARTHAGE (d. 258)

Although we often identify faith with accepting a list of beliefs or doctrines, faith is better understood as our commitment to God and our relationship with God. The root of the word faith in Latin refers to the “bond” that establishes and sustains a relationship. This is synonymous with our sense of trust. When we trust someone, we entrust ourselves to him or her. Our care for and commitment to others in relationships always involves greater sharing. Our Bible reading recalls the long history of the many others before us who have discovered God, committed themselves to a more conscious relationship and lived accordingly. We can learn from their example.

**Bible Reading Can Help You Change Your Priorities.**

As you begin to live a more conscious spiritual life, the effects begin to ripple out to every part of your life. By encouraging you to look seriously at your relationships with God and with others, Bible reading changes your priorities. By learning to notice God’s presence and activity, you add a spiritual component to your understanding and action—you include God! And changing your priorities will then affect how you make decisions about how to live. Making decisions does not necessarily become any easier, but you see more clearly what is at stake and become more aware of what values guide you.

**Bible Reading Can Help You Deepen Your Family Life.**

Changing your priorities through Bible reading helps you deepen your family life because it constantly draws your attention to the task of living out your significant relationships. Since the Bible is your guide for right relationships, it
shows you where some other seekers have found God, how they were changed by that encounter, and how they found others with whom they could live in right relationship to God.

God calls us into relationships and makes demands about how we ought to live. Every relationship demands creating a community—a co-mission with the other. When lovers commit themselves to one another, their co-mission is to build a family. When believers join together, their co-mission is to create God’s dream community. The Bible provides help for understanding our common goal and the cost it will take to achieve it.

**Bible Reading Can Help You Reorient Your Work Life.**
If you can begin to see your work as a vocation rather than just a job, then the meaning of your work changes. Since meaning comes when you connect what you are doing to something else, the meaning of your work changes when you connect it to your relationship with God and to your co-mission to create the kind of relationships with others that God desires.

**Bible Reading Can Help You Find More Meaning in Life.**
Meaning cannot occur in isolation. Words become meaningful only when we connect them together into sentences and arrange them into ever larger paragraphs and chapters. Meaning comes through placing elements into contexts.

> “Indeed the authority of Scripture seemed to be more revered and more worthy of devoted faith because it was at once a book that everyone could read and read easily, and yet it preserved the majesty of its mystery in the deepest part of its meaning. For it offers itself to everyone in the plainest words and the simplest expressions, yet it demands the closest attention of the most serious minds.”

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> _ST. AUGUSTINE (d. 430)_
> *Confessions, 6:5*

So the meaning of our life as a whole emerges when we put all the pieces together and then relate it to some larger context. For some this might be their family, for others a corporation or a project. For religious persons the wider context is God’s reality. The Bible provides the context in which our lives can finally be understood. We are called to be in relationship with God in a community of fellow believers. Reading the Bible brings you face-to-face
with God, who wants to be in a relationship. But relationships take time and effort. Your Bible journey is a lifetime journey with this divine companion. It offers a way to stop, take time with God and revitalize your relationship.

**Discovering New Worlds**

One of the best things about going on a trip is that you visit new places and see new sights. A reading journey involves movement both into and through a new world, along with reflection about the meaning of what you are seeing. As you travel in this new world, you need to understand what is happening to you. Travel always helps you see your culture and yourself in a new way because you step out of your ordinary perspective. Seeing the world through the eyes of a different culture lets you notice your own culture more clearly.

To whatever degree your ordinary life includes God in it or not, by traveling to the biblical world you have the opportunity to discover a place where God is at the center of the world. In the biblical world, God’s presence is the central organizing factor around which everything else revolves. Through your reading, you are invited to reorient your ordinary life along the coordinates of meaning and purpose that you will discover in the biblical world.

The biblical standpoint and perspective produce a “culture shock” that challenges your understanding of the way our world ought to be and your priorities for everyday living. This demands changes in your behavior if you are going to live according to your new understanding. Reading the Bible encourages and keeps alive the dangerous notion that there is a hidden reality beyond the world of appearances. And that reality is God!

**Meeting New and Fascinating People**

Another great advantage of traveling is meeting new and fascinating people. Journeying into Bible country brings you face-to-face with a whole array of strange and mysterious people who are much like you. Each of these new characters helps you to discover God’s presence and to respond to it.

But meeting new people is always risky. You never know what effect they will have on you. Encountering another can confirm and comfort you, confront and challenge you, or surprise and renew you. Journeying into Bible
country can confirm your cherished beliefs and behaviors or challenge you to adopt a fresh vision and different values because of the people you discover along the way. Meeting new people always puts you on the alert for new ways of communicating and relating to others. Each biblical character shows you unique responses to God’s presence, which express his or her relationship to God. Communities also take on distinctive traits as they embody God’s dream for the right kind of community.

Of course the most fascinating personality of all is God. The Bible portrays God in all the mysterious diversity of a real person. God is the main character throughout the biblical story. Through God’s actions and words you discover who God is and how God likes to relate to us. Thus the Bible preserves the memory of God’s relationship to humanity.

Through reading the Bible you become familiar with God’s personality and what God expects from you. The main story of the Bible is God’s desire to have a people who realize in their lives the way God wants us to live. First with the Israelites, and then with Christians, God seeks a community that is the sign and model of God’s loving presence among us.

“You called, you shouted, and you broke through my deafness. You flashed, you shone, and you dispelled my blindness. You breathed your fragrance on me; I drew in breath and now I pant for you. I have tasted you, now I hunger and thirst for more.”

—ST. AUGUSTINE (d. 430)

For many Christians, meeting Jesus in the gospels is often a new experience. Whatever we might know about Jesus comes alive as we hear his words and consider his actions. We discover his agenda for right relationships with God and one another. Scripture scholar Marcus Borg describes reading the Bible as an adult as “meeting Jesus again for the first time!” Jesus never loses his fascination and mystery as God’s revelation in human form.

Bible reading always brings us out of our comfort zones into a strange and unfamiliar world. No one can encounter Jesus through the gospels and remain untouched by this experience. No matter how much we think we already know about the God of the Bible or about Jesus, we are constantly surprised when we begin to meet them anew in the Bible’s pages.
What Are You Seeking?

We are mistaken, though, to think that God will be found in the pages of the book. The Bible does not give us God. Rather, it witnesses where God has been found by other seekers like us, how they were changed by that encounter, and how they attempted to find ways to live with others in a community guided by their relationship with the God they had discovered.

Moreover, we really only learn what the Bible means when we relate it to our life. Like any book, the biblical story, characters and themes take on increased significance only when we decide that they mean more than what we find between the covers of the book. When we connect what we read with something in our life, then we’ll remember what we read and let it shape us. For this reason, your Bible reading journey does not just inform but transforms you as you move beyond simply amassing scraps of information to being shaped by the meanings you discover.

The journey of Bible reading, like every journey you make, is full of surprises. It is a mixture of anticipation and anxiety, fun and fear. The unknown stirs up anxieties in all of us. We never know what we will face and whether or not we will be able to handle what does come. But often our curiosity gets the better of us, and we decide to venture out to experience something new that we hope will change our lives.

Questions for Reflection and Group Discussion

1. What is going on in your life now that points you toward the Bible and not some other book?
2. Is reading the Bible more like business or pleasure for you? Why?
3. How would you rank the following goals for your Bible reading:
   ___ basic beliefs,
   ___ historical information,
   ___ community life and worship,
   ___ moral guidelines for living,
   ___ prayer? Share the reasons for your rankings.
4. Have you ever been to a foreign country? Share two things that were very different there—one that you liked and another that you disliked.
THE TOP TEN REASONS FOR READING YOUR BIBLE

10. You will never have to worry about choosing the Bible category on Jeopardy.
9. You can get a jump start for your spiritual life.
8. You can watch late-night cable TV and not worry about the end of the world.
7. You can travel to the heart of God without leaving your living room.
6. You won’t hesitate to talk to strangers about the apocalypse.
5. You’ll learn how to avoid the dumb mistakes smart people make in relating to God.
4. You’ll be able to explain to others why B-I-B-L-E is short for “Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth.”
3. You will discover secrets about the quirky religious family you belong to.
2. You can meet Jesus again for the first time.
1. You will come face-to-face with the God who loves you.
Chapter Two

Overcoming Your Fear of Bible Travel

Reading the Bible is a dangerous venture. When we go beyond our usual boundaries, we never quite know what will happen. The further we travel from our home, where everything is familiar and our comfort level is high, the more likely we are to meet people who are not like us.

Journeys change us because they take us across the boundaries that keep us comfortably insulated from worlds that are different from ours. Whenever we go to a new place and meet new people, we risk change. Just as we risk the possibility of change whenever we venture out of our neighborhood—or our country—so we will be vulnerable if we venture outside our familiar religious worldview. In all my years of teaching the Bible to adults, the one constant certainty was this: As we work on God’s Word, God’s Word works on us.

Four Common Fears and How to Overcome Them

Deciding to embark on the journey of Bible reading is not always easy. You can have doubts, anxieties and fears about this trip, just as you would about any physical journey. What if I don’t know enough about the land or the people or the language? What if the journey is more hazardous than I imagined? What if I encounter situations that will demand that I change? What if I get lost and cannot find my way back?

Fear of the unfamiliar can paralyze us and keep us from making the journey that we know will change us. For many of us who want to read and study the Bible, there are four fears that, more than anything else, prevent us from making the biblical journey: fear of our ignorance, fear of inadequacy, fear of change, and fear of getting lost.

If we are to overcome these fears, we must increase our trust. In Bible country, the opposite of fear is faith. Faith here means trust in God rather than
merely an intellectual acceptance of doctrines. Jesus, for example, tells a father seeking help for his dying daughter, “Do not be afraid; just have faith” (Mark 5:36, NABRE). We, too, must heed this invitation of Jesus. These fears that threaten to keep us from our journey can be overcome if we notch up our trust—trust in the one who calls us, in ourselves as learners and in our companions who walk with us on the journey.

**Fear 1: I’m Too Dumb**

The most common fear when approaching the formidable journey of Bible reading is that we are not smart enough. We have been told either directly or indirectly that the Bible is so complicated that we must leave its interpretation to the experts. And since they always seem to be disagreeing, what hope can there be for an ordinary layperson to understand it?

> “Exegesis may have a distinctive role in the interpretation of the Bible but they do not exercise a monopoly. This activity within the Church has aspects which go beyond the academic analysis of texts. The Church, indeed, does not regard the Bible simply as a collection of historical documents dealing with its own origins; it receives the Bible as the word of God, addressed both to itself and to the entire world at the present time.”

—PONTIFICAL BIBLICAL COMMISSION

The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church (1993)

Well, trust yourself as a reader. The Bible was not written for scholars but for ordinary people who were far less educated than you are! Since most of the original readers could not read at all, the Bible was read out loud to them. They had no extra helps or commentaries except the guidance of someone in the community who had a little more knowledge than they did.

The biblical journey is not a head trip. The message of the Bible is not some complicated abstract doctrine. If that were the case, then the authors would probably have chosen to write it as philosophical essays. The Bible is a collection of the treasured memories of a family relationship with God and others. It is meant to change your life, not just your ideas.

Trust yourself to discover the message about God and God’s purpose that is there for you. Be humble enough to recognize that what you discover need not match exactly what others are looking for. Dialogue with others is
always essential to focus on the truths that are hidden in God’s Word. Holding the Bible in your hands is a lot easier than holding its message in your heart. This personal assimilation takes a lifetime of conversion.

Many adult Catholics also carry a subtle sense of shame along with this feeling of ignorance. We feel that we ought to already know more about the Bible than we do. We assume that everybody else knows so much more than we do. Even our kids seem more Bible literate than we are! We hide our ignorance lest others discover that we are biblical illiterates.

First of all, accept the fact that you do not know much. Being “biblically challenged” is nothing to be ashamed of! Knowing that you don’t know is where all learners begin. Like the Greek philosopher Socrates, who was identified as the wisest man in Athens because he admitted that there was so much he did not know, acknowledge your ignorance and increase your desire to learn. This is what being a Bible reader is all about.

“It is no small gain to know your own ignorance.”
—ST. JEROME (d. 420)
Letter 61

Second, keep in mind that you don’t have to become an expert on the Bible, but you do need to become a more competent reader. (Remember that there are few areas of life in which you are expected to be an expert!) Becoming a more serious reader who can read the Bible carefully and with ever increasing sensitivity is the goal to strive for. The more you know about the Bible and how to read it, the better you will understand God’s message.

**Fear 2: It’s Too Hard**

We have been told that reading the Bible is dangerous and that people read it incorrectly. We hear endless debates on late-night TV about what the Bible really means. We tend to think, *Since it takes scholars so many years to acquire competence to read it, it is certainly too complicated for a regular person like me to understand. Just leave it to the experts who really know what they are doing.*

Again, trust your own ability as a reader. I am often reminded of the biblical story of David and Goliath. Goliath was a giant whose size struck fear in everyone. When David offered to meet Goliath in combat, the soldiers
assumed that David could fight only if he donned King Saul’s armor. But since
the king’s armor was not David’s size, it was far too unwieldy to help him. So
David reverted to his own tried-and-true sling and five smooth stones.

We do not have to read the Bible using the elaborate methods of
Scripture scholarship. The scholars’ sophisticated methods are very impor-
tant, and their conclusions yield meanings that would often remain unno-
ticed. But these methods are always refinements of the basic questions that
curious and careful readers will ask about any text.

“No one will be surprised, if all difficulties are not yet solved and overcome; but that
even today serious problems greatly exercise the minds of Catholic exegetes….Thus it
has happened that certain disputed points, which in the past remained unsolved and in
suspense, in our days, with the progress of studies, have found a satisfactory solution.
Hence there are grounds for hope that those also will by constant effort be at last made
clear, which now seem most complicated and difficult.”

—POPE PIUS XII
Divino Afflante Spiritu (1943), #44

Books are written to be read and biblical books were written to reveal
something to us about God and about our relationship with God and others.
The most basic rule for any reading is simply to know what we are doing and
why we are doing it. As long as we are careful in our reading and understand
the potential pitfalls, we can usually read the Bible with much profit. As
always, we must remember that the goal of our reading is not scholarly infor-
mation but the transformation of ourselves in our relationship with God.

We can also use the helps available for better reading. There are many
books that give a sense of the times in which the biblical books were written
and the messages they conveyed to their original audiences. Entrust yourself to
guides who are competent and know their way. They will not let you go astray.

Fear 3: It’s Too Threatening
Travelers know that venturing into unfamiliar territory will change them.
Holding the Bible in your hands can be comforting. Hearing and heeding its
message in your heart is more difficult. Bible reading will often bring you
into regions you usually dare not enter. So you might have that sneaking feel-
ing that what you will find in the Bible will not always be comfortable.
Bible reading invites you to encounter a divinely charged reality that always involves more than you can imagine or comfortably manage in your present experience. Touching the divine transforms you forever. Can you let yourself be drawn in directions you would never choose and be transformed by your journey? There is no way to meet God and ever be the same again.

“This Bible, this ubiquitous, persistent black chunk of a best-seller, is a chink—often the only chink—through which winds howl. It is a singularity, a black hole into which our rich and multiple world strays and vanishes. We crack open its pages at our peril. Many educated, urbane, and flourishing experts in every aspect of business, culture, and science have felt pulled by this anachronistic, semi barbaric mass of antique laws and fabulous tales from far away; they entered its queer, strait gates and were lost. Eyes open, heads high, in full possession of their critical minds, they obeyed the high, inaudible whistle, and let the gates close behind them. Respectable parents who love their children leave this absolutely respectable book lying about, as a possible safeguard against, say, drugs; alas, it is the book that kidnaps the children, and hooks them.”

—ANNIE DILLARD
in Incarnation, ed. Alfred Corn (1990)

As the Jewish prophet Jeremiah warned, we dare to make the journey to meet God only because God calls us into this relationship, or “why else would one dare approach me? says the Lord” (Jeremiah 30:21, NABRE). But we must be daring if we want to live in relationship with God.

This is the risk we all face when we say yes to God. Living in a relationship with God is always a challenge. When you decide to live more responsibly in the light of your commitment to this relationship, then the obligations of that relationship will require some changes in you. You must accept the risk of living fully in relation to God. God is satisfied with nothing less than the sacrifice—the making holy—of your whole self. You must be both holy and whole.

This relationship stamps our lives and is a risk because you will have to change your perceptions of who you are, what you think, and how you act. These do not change easily because they have become part of you as you have grown up in your family, your society and your Church. It is a truism that physically, we begin to die from the moment we are born. But spiritually, you begin to die to an old way of being from the moment you make your faith...
commitment to be in relationship with God and live more responsibly. This “death” to yourself and your old way of living is the doorway to new life.

You overcome your fear of personal change as you entrust yourself more and more to God. Thus the changes that follow will be good ones because they are what God wants. You must be willing to die to yourself—your ego, your old vision of reality, your old values, and your old behaviors—to be transformed. To see the world the way Jesus does, to value it as he does and to act in it as he does will lead you into a new relationship with God. You will be transformed in a way that will no longer entail the fear that haunts you now.

**Fear 4: I Might Get Lost**

Anyone who has tried to read the Bible on their own has usually had this fear overtake them just about the time they get to the books of Leviticus and Numbers. After reading the exciting stories in the first books of Genesis and Exodus—about the patriarch Abraham and his family, the escapades that landed them in Egypt, their oppression and finally their exhilarating exodus under the leadership of Moses—readers suddenly feel as stranded in the wilderness as the wandering Hebrews were.

Usually, at this point they put down the Bible and assume that there is nothing there for them. They mistakenly believe that if they try to travel into this territory again, they may never come out alive. They return to their everyday lives without ever discovering the Bible’s hidden treasures or how to apply them to their own lives.

In order to overcome this particular fear, you have to realize that making the biblical journey might best be done under the guidance of someone you can trust. Like the American settlers who decided to brave the trip across the prairies to a new life, you need to entrust your journey to a scout who knows the trails because he or she has been there before. The scout is able not only to show the way but also to warn you of potential dangers. If you choose your guides well, you can trust them to lead you to the destination you seek.

You must also remember that we never read the Bible alone. All reading assumes a community that shares the same language and the conventions of reading. Without this community, interpretation is impossible. The commu-
nity in which the interpretation of the Bible occurs is the Christian Church. The Bible belongs to the Church before it belongs to any individual.

Reading for meaning always requires that we test our conclusions against those of other readers. So we read the Bible in the whole tradition of believers for whom this book has been the privileged guide to life in relationship with God. Not only scholars but also the official teachers of the Church have always been concerned with right reading. If you entrust yourself to the Church’s guidelines for Scripture, then you will not go wrong.

Your Bible journey can also be more fun if you encourage other travelers to accompany you. Just as traveling invites comments about what you have seen and done, so Bible reading invites comments about what you are experiencing and how it is affecting you. Companions on the journey make travel much more interesting and enjoyable. Sharing with others also provides a good sounding board for testing your impressions and conclusions.

**Traveler’s Tips for Making the Bible Journey**

Bible reading, and the relationship with God and others that it nourishes, can be the most fascinating, the most rewarding and sometimes even the most frustrating journey you will ever take. Seasoned travelers who have made the journey can offer advice that helps you. They know what you ought to carry with you and what you should abandon as useless. Here are four traveler’s tips that I think are particularly helpful.

**Tip 1: Don’t Worry about the Bible; Worry about Yourself**

Often we get defensive about God and the Bible—especially when relating to those skeptics who question our religious claims more than we do. When embarking on the Bible journey, it is best not to worry so much about the Bible as about yourself. The Bible has weathered all the storms of more than twenty-five hundred years of aggressive and critical scrutiny.

The Bible was written to be read, and it can be read for many different reasons and in a variety of contexts. We can never assume that we have exhausted the divinely revealed mysteries contained in it. New questions about the text are always being discovered. It will take the lifetime of the Church to understand the Bible.
You need to worry more about yourself as a reader. Making the message of the Bible your own and applying it to your life requires effort. How willing are you to take time with the Bible, to learn what it says and consider seriously what it means and to use your knowledge to live a better Christian life?

**Tip 2: Don’t Try to Control the Bible**
The Bible is a tool for living. Like any tool, it can’t volunteer to be used. You have to decide how to use it to accomplish your goals. Your skill determines how effective you are. But although the user is normally in charge of a tool, the reader does not control God’s Word. You will be mistaken if you assume that, like ordinary tools, the Bible is completely under your control.

The Bible can be used for a variety of tasks. Learning to use the Bible in our lives demands the skills of reading,interpretation and application. Moreover, as our lives change, we will need to use these skills to apply the Bible to our relationship to God and to other people.

> “The Bible is a stream in which the elephant may swim and the lamb may wade.”
> **—POPE ST. GREGORY I (THE GREAT) (d. 604)**

God controls the Bible’s utterance as well as its meaning. Just as we have no control over the minds and speech of others, so we have no control over God’s Word. What the text reveals is not up to us but up to God. We can spend a lifetime trying to control God, but it never works. The Bible reminds us over and over that despite our most strenuous efforts, we can never manipulate God. God’s ways are not always our ways, and we cannot force God into our molds. This hard lesson forces us always to let God be God.

Just as it is a waste of energy to use the wrong tool, so it is unwise to use the Bible to pressure others to do what you think they ought to do. By all means, share what you are learning with your family, your friends and co-workers, and other Bible readers whom you gather with or encounter along the way. But you do not have to use the Bible as if it were a hammer to beat them into submission or convert them to your ways of thinking and of doing things. Jesus did not do this nor should we.

Acknowledge that although the paths that others follow might be different from yours, those paths might also lead them to God, who can often
be found in surprising places. Take a lesson from the master Jesus, who, in a gentle and kindly way, imparts the message of God’s presence in our midst and of God’s rule over our world. But he requires that each person decide to respond and act on his message. This respect for others and an appreciation of their personal discovery of God will encourage them to take the unique journey to which God is calling them.

**Tip 3: Get Ready for Surprises**

The Bible journey is full of surprises. When people share with one another what they are discovering, it becomes clear that the Bible is full of endless meanings and applications. One reason for this is that the divinely revealed realities about God can never be fully fathomed by our human minds. The truth of the Bible is not the truth of a proposition but the truth of a person. The Bible text not only illuminates us, guides us and helps us but it also challenges us and calls into question who we are and how we live in relation to God and others.

“Provided that each person tries to ascertain in the holy scriptures the meaning the author intended, what harm is there if a reader holds an opinion that you, the light of all truthful minds, show to be true, even though it is not what was intended by the author who himself meant something true, but not exactly that?”

—ST. AUGUSTINE (d. 430)
Confessions, 12.18

Different interpretations also arise because meanings change when contexts do. When your reading situation or your personal needs change, your discoveries in the Bible will change too. I am always astounded (and a little embarrassed) when I look at my dog-eared student Bible and see how in my eager enthusiasm I triple underlined a passage and wrote “Wow—this says it all!!!” in the margin. Looking at that today, I have no idea why that passage seemed so significant then—and is so insignificant today. In the intervening years, I have changed, but the Bible’s words haven’t.

As you make your Bible journey, then, know that whatever you think you know about God and about Christ is never the full answer. Being in a relationship with someone else is a never-ending surprise both about the other
person and yourself. So live the Bible’s questions and let them challenge you. When what you read makes you uncomfortable, you can be sure that this is a sign from God about where you need to grow.

**Tip 4: Enjoy Your Journey**

Bible reading helps you discover that God is always present in your life and eager to enter a relationship with you. God has called you on the journey so that you can live a fuller and more spiritual life. Although following this spiritual path can make you anxious, it is essential if you are to meet God.

“In the Old Testament, Abraham’s grandson Jacob, whose name was later changed to Israel, had a famous dream about a staircase leading up to heaven. The Bible is like that staircase for you, allowing you to approach God and God to draw near to you. On waking up from his dream, Jacob realized that “the Lord is in this place, although I did not know it!” (Genesis 28:16, NABRE). So as we begin this Bible journey, let us pray as Jacob did:

“If God will be with me and protect me on this journey I am making and to give me food to eat and clothes to wear, and I come back safely to my father’s house, the Lord will be my God.”

(Genesis 28:20–21, NABRE)

**Questions for Reflection and Group Discussion**

1. Which of the four common fears of Bible reading most paralyzes you? Why?
2. What other fears do you have concerning your Bible reading journey?
3. What do you expect to find out about God from the Bible?
4. What advice about God do you like to quote to others?
For Catholic Christians, the Bible is not just another book on the local bookstore shelf. As Catholic Christians, we have certain beliefs about the Bible before we ever come to read it. In brief, as Vatican Council II expressed it, we believe that our Bible is “the words of God, expressed in human language” (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, November 18, 1965, #13). Our Bible is not just a book; it’s our sacred book.

“Each day the Church feels more clearly the need to turn to the sacred Scriptures to read what the Church is and what she is called to be. There is no spiritual, catechetical or pastoral life which does not require a constant return to the sacred books. Do not cease to scrutinize these texts through philological, linguistic, literary and historical research. This leads to a better understanding of the word of God.”

—POPE JOHN PAUL II
Address to the Pontifical Biblical Institute (May 17, 1984)

As sacred or holy, our Bible is the book we pick up when we want to know about God and our relationship with God. Reading the Bible provides clues about the reality of God and cues for responding to God in appropriate ways. The biblical story is the story of God with us, and this story continues to shape our lives and our world.

Our goal here is not to argue in theological detail about our Catholic beliefs about the Bible but rather to acknowledge them and understand how they influence our approach to the Bible. These assumptions do not come explicitly from the Bible itself but are the theological beliefs that shape our approach when we pick up this text. They are like eyeglasses through which we see everything else but that we hardly notice wearing anymore because we have grown so used to them.
The sacred character of the Bible can be summarized in our four Catholic beliefs about it, namely that:

- God has had a special role in the production (inspiration)
- of just these particular sacred books (canonical),
- which disclose the truth of God’s own mysterious reality (revelation)
- without error in these divinely revealed truths (inerrancy).

When we identify the Bible as our sacred text, we are declaring our beliefs about the Bible. As Christians, we affirm that the Bible is not just another book. It is a collection of many texts written in different literary forms, which are not merely the product of human imagination and effort. While we recognize that the Bible was composed by human authors using their literary gifts to express their experience of God, we believe that God also cooperated in the production of the text so that these books contain a divine message.

“What page, what passage of the inspired books of the Old and New Testaments is not the truest of guides for human life.”

—ST. BENEDICT (d. 543)
Rule, 73.3

This sacred character sets the Bible apart from all other books. Non-Christian believers have their own sacred books and their explanation of why their texts are sacred and how they ought to be interpreted. The sacred aspect of our Christian biblical text is summarized in these four theological claims.

Claim 1: The Bible Is Inspired

Our first theological claim about the Bible as our sacred text is that its composition is inspired. Inspiration means “to breathe into.” The image here is of God breathing into the original authors the vital energy to write the ideas that express God’s special meanings.

When we claim that the composition of the biblical books is inspired, we are claiming that they are not merely human endeavors but that God somehow aided the human authors to produce the text that God desired. But we must note that our belief that the texts are inspired is a theological claim.
and not an explanation of the process. A claim that something is true is not to be confused with an explanation of how it can be so. We know this even from our own experience. For example, we know that our computer can handle thousands of tasks every second or that our car runs when we start it, without necessarily having a clue about how exactly they really work.

Another example is our theological belief concerning Jesus. We believe that he is both truly human and truly divine, yet no theologian has ever provided a satisfactory explanation of how exactly this mystery occurs. So our belief in divine inspiration affirms that God aided in the composition of the biblical text. But this is not a psychological description of how God influenced the writers. This process will always remain shrouded in mystery.

We must also remember that when we are talking about biblical inspiration, we are talking about the written texts. Since all of the biblical books are inspired, we must recognize that in communicating with us God has inspired many different types or forms of literature—poetry, prose, narratives, stories, proverbs, parables, songs, oracles, letters and historical documents. As Vatican Council II reminds us, “truth is presented and expressed differently in historical, prophetic or poetic texts, or in other styles of speech” (On Revelation, #12). If we do not acknowledge this diversity of literary types, we run the risk of missing the message God desires to communicate to us. It is not enough to assume, as some people try to do, that everything in the Bible must be historical.

Claim 2: The Bible Is Our Rule of Life

The Bible as a sacred text is the standard for our lives as Christian believers. These particular books collected as our Bible provide the fixed standard against which we measure the authenticity of our Christian faith and its practice. The Greek word for this standard or ruler is canon. So we describe these biblical books as canonical. There are two characteristics of something that is canonical: First, it must be fixed as a standard; second, it can be used to measure other things.

For any standard to be effective, it has to be fixed and constant. Can you imagine trying to measure things with a ruler whose length is constantly changing? Thus the term canonical identifies only the books we include in the
VATICAN COUNCIL II ON THE THEOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE BIBLE AS OUR SACRED TEXT

The most authoritative Roman Catholic faith affirmations about the four characteristics of the biblical text as revealed, inspired, inerrant regarding the truths of revelation, and canonical can be found in Vatican Council II’s *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* (*Dei Verbum, DV*). The highlights of these Catholic affirmations are summarized here.

The Bible is our sacred text because it is:

1. **Revealed (DV #2): God’s free self-communication for our salvation**
   “God chose to reveal himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of his will.… Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God out of the abundance of his love speaks to humanity as friends and lives among them so that he might invite and take them into fellowship with him. This plan of revelation is realized by deeds and words having an inner unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teachings and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them. By this revelation, then, the deepest truth about God and the salvation of humanity is made clear to us in Christ who is the mediator and at the same time the fullness of revelation.”

   Our theological belief in divine revelation also affirms that God freely chose “to share those divine treasures which totally transcend the understanding of the human mind” (DV #6). These truths alone can be identified as the truths of revelation.

2. **Inspired (DV #11): God’s assistance to the human authors to write their books**
   “Those divinely revealed realities which are contained and presented in sacred Scripture have been committed to writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Holy Mother Church, relying on the belief of the apostles, holds that the books of both the Old and New Testament in their entirety, with all their parts, are sacred and canonical because, having been written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit they have God as their author and have been handed on as such to the Church herself. In composing the sacred books, God chose humans and while employed by God they made use of their powers and abilities, so that with God acting in them and through them, they, as true authors, consigned to writing everything and only those things which God wanted. Therefore, since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation.”

3. **Without error in the truths of our salvation (see last sentence of quote under 2)**

4. **Canonical and normative for all members of the Church (see quote under 2)**
   So the sacredness of our biblical texts is expressed by faith claims, supported by reason, and requires a faith-oriented approach to guide the historical-critical and other methods used for interpreting their meaning (DV #12, and see especially the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s 1993 document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*) because encountering this biblical text will transform our life (DV #21, 26).
Bible. There are many other books that are as old as biblical books, but they are not included in the official list, the fixed standard, or canon, of Scripture.

Again, although we do not have all the historical data to know exactly how the early Christian community settled on just these particular books from among the many available, we do believe that the process was guided by God’s Holy Spirit. We do know that between the second and fourth centuries the Catholic canon, or official list of biblical books, was essentially decided.

This fixing of the canon allows all later Christians to measure their faith against the standard “rule” of the early communities. The designation of only these books as canonical does not deny that non-biblical books can contain some truth about God or about the Christian life. Nor does it limit the developing theological reflection that over the centuries leads to more precise expressions of the biblical truths. The canon provides the basic standard against which the meaning and usefulness of these other books can be measured.

“In discerning the canon of Scripture, the Church was also discerning and defining her own identity. Henceforth Scripture was to function as a mirror in which the Church could continually rediscover her identity and assess, century after century, the way in which she constantly responds to the gospel and equips herself to be an apt vehicle of its transmission. This confers on the canonical writings a salvific and theological value completely different from that attaching to other ancient texts. The latter may throw much light on the origins of the faith. But they can never substitute for the authority of the writings held to be canonical and thus fundamental for the understanding of the Christian faith.”

—THE PONTIFICAL BIBLICAL COMMISSION
The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church (1993)

For us Christians, God is not only in the Bible but is also present and working in our everyday lives. We believe that the biblical texts provide our most reliable clues as we discover and understand God’s self-revelation in our world. The Bible is our most trustworthy guide to the knowledge of God’s sacred reality and the most helpful source for the most authentic responses that we can make to God’s transforming presence when we discover it. With the help of these biblical texts, we can learn how to clarify our relationship with God and discover new ways to live it out in our lives today.
Claim 3: The Bible Is Revealed

Our third faith claim about the Bible as our sacred text is that its content or message is revealed. *Reveal* means “to take the veil off” or to uncover something that is now hidden. Just as we never know the hidden thoughts or feelings of other persons unless they communicate them to us in words or actions, so the Bible is described as God’s self-revelation, or word, to us, which freely reveals the hidden mysteries of God’s inner self as a personal communication or word and not just a list of abstract truths.

“God can be known to us in the same way as persons can see an endless ocean by standing at the shore at night with a dimly lit candle. Do you think they can see much? Not much, almost nothing. And, nevertheless, they see the water well. They know that there is an ocean in front of them, that this ocean is huge and that they cannot see it all at once. The same is true of our knowledge of God.”

—ST. SIMEON THE NEW THEOLOGIAN (d. 1022)  
Oration 61

When we claim that God uses these human texts to reveal, or uncover, the hidden mystery of God’s self for us, we describe these texts as revealed. Since texts disclose the mind of the author, every text is a kind of self-revelation in which the hidden depths of the author are expressed. Thus for biblical texts, the interior mystery of both the divine author and the human authors can be discerned. But the divine self-revelation makes our texts sacred.

The Bible is our sacred text because it discloses, or reveals, God’s personal mystery. We could never know this mystery unless God freely communicated it to us in ways we understand. Moreover, this self-disclosure never happens once and for all. Just as it takes a lifetime of experience to get to know a human person well, so we must expect that knowing God’s mysterious person well is a process that begins in our human lifetime but certainly does not end there.

Claim 4: The Bible Is Truthful

The final faith claim about the Bible as our sacred text is that it is without error in the divine truths that God reveals to us for our salvation. This claim
of truth follows from the character of the text both as revealed and as inspired by God’s free personal activity.

The truths of divine revelation are not something that we could learn about God by using our human intelligence. If we could discover these truths on our own, then God would not need to reveal them. Instead, these divinely revealed truths are something that we would never have imagined, much less discovered by ourselves—the trinitarian reality of God and the incarnate, divine-human reality of Jesus of Nazareth. These core revelations are the foundation for all of our specifically Christian truths.

Theologians call these divinely revealed truths mysteries. A theological mystery describes something that our minds can never totally comprehend no matter how hard or how long we think about it. These mysteries like the Trinity and the Incarnation are so profound that our human thinking will never explain them or exhaust their richness. Again, we can affirm by faith that they are true, but no amount of human effort will ever explain how they can be so since they are, and always will be, beyond our human ability to understand and explain them. But since they can come only from God as God’s own self-revelation, we confidently affirm that they are without error.

“Most mistaken people mean well, and all mistaken people mean something. There is something to be said for every error, but, whatever may be said for it, the most important thing to be said about it is that it is erroneous.”

—G.K. CHESTERTON (d. 1936)
All Is Grist

Because God chose to communicate these divine mysteries through the words of the biblical authors and inspire the process of composition so that these biblical books really do contain these divine truths, we must carefully distinguish between the divine truth and the human truth found in these books. We must accept that even though their texts communicate divine revelation, the biblical authors were limited by their fallible and incomplete human knowledge concerning both historical events and God’s own reality.

So when we detect factual errors in the Bible regarding human events or geography or anything the human authors did not accurately understand or express, we conclude that these errors are the result of the limitations of the
human authors rather than something God is responsible for. In the truths of God’s divinely revealed mystery, there is no error.

As our sacred text, then, the Bible is our special source for discovering the God with whom we are intimately related. Through it, we are better able to encounter, recognize, understand and respond to God. The Bible gives us a way to discern who God is, how God interacts with us, and what God expects from us as Christians in our relationship to God and to others. By entering into God’s world through our Bible reading, we learn to imagine the world and our place in it as God wants it to be. Our challenge then will be to make this a reality in our lives.

Questions for Reflection and Group Discussion

1. What is the difference between inspiration as a theological claim and as a psychological explanation?
2. For Christians, what is a revealed mystery? Why will we never fully comprehend it?
3. How would you explain to a friend that the inspired biblical authors could be wrong about historical or scientific information?
4. What is the canon of Scripture? How would you explain to a friend why it is limited to only certain books and not others that we know about today?
The books of the Bible, as we noted in the previous chapter, are a mysterious combination of divine and human composition. Their reality mirrors the divine-human composition of Jesus himself. As Vatican Council II expressed it in its *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* (*Dei Verbum*), “Indeed, God’s words, expressed through human language, have taken on the likeness of human speech, just as the Word of the eternal Father, when he assumed the flesh of human weakness, took on the likeness of human beings” (#13).

Just as we believe that Jesus was at once both fully divine and fully human, without mixture or confusion, we likewise believe that the Bible is both God’s Word and human words. When we examine these writings, we will find that their fullest meaning can be comprehended only if we take seriously what both the human authors and God wished to communicate. Errors occur when we put too much emphasis on either the divine or the human dimension—whether in regard to Jesus or the sacred Scriptures.

We can usually trace conflicts over Bible interpretation to an imbalance of emphasis. We can concentrate so emphatically on the divinity, or sacredness, of the Bible as “what God says” that we obscure its embodiment in our human language and situation. Or we can stress the human dimension of the Bible as “just another text” to the point of eliminating its divine character. In either case, the distinctive character of the Bible as our sacred text—God’s Word in human language—is denied.

This need for a balanced approach stands behind the Church’s diligent search not only for the literal meanings that the human authors intended but also for the spiritual meanings that God intended for our salvation. A Catholic interpretation of the Bible considers both of these dimensions in order to be faithful to the full reality of this sacred text.
In fact, we might best characterize this Catholic approach as a “faith-full” reading. Approaching the Bible from a standpoint of faith, the reader seeks to discover God by reading this sacred biblical text. But the reader also submits this text to the full spectrum of human techniques devised for reading and interpreting texts. Only this “faith-full” approach respects both the sacred and the textual dimensions of the Bible.

Recognizing the Bible as a Sacred Text

The sacred character of the Bible reminds us that the Bible is always about the mystery of God’s own hidden self. This sacred dimension discloses the discrepancy between our human condition and the divine reality to which the text refers. Since God is spiritual and invisible, physical descriptions of God in the Bible can never be exact likenesses but must be symbolic language.

“In the view of the Church, the Bible is not merely a literary work but also a religious work put together with a religious motive, chosen and constituted according to a religious criteria. It differs from all human books for it is an inspired book containing and transmitting divine revelation.”

—POPE PAUL VI
Address (April 19, 1968)

The Bible expresses its sacred theological meaning in imaginative symbols that convey truths “beyond words” far better than reasoned arguments could. Since the divinely revealed mysteries are not objects, they cannot be spoken about directly or comprehended fully in ideas or concepts. What we learn about God in the Bible is never a direct description but rather expressed in symbolic language. Thus, dealing with symbols becomes a necessary part of our reading task when we want to understand God’s sacred reality.

Even though symbols of God always fall short of expressing fully the divine mystery, biblical authors depended on the evocative power of symbolic imagery to capture their experience of God’s transcendent yet immanent presence. Learning to understand the sacred requires learning to interpret symbols. But we trivialize the meaning and power of these symbols when
we take them literalistically and treat them as if they were direct pictures or sensation-based descriptions of God’s divine reality.

The Bible’s symbolic language wonderfully matches the elusive reality of God’s mystery. Its vision and language, like Jesus’ favorite teaching tool the parables, reveal yet conceal, disclose yet obscure, and in the end leave incomprehensible the “depths of God” (1 Corinthians 2:10). Reaching up to this mystery from the depths of our humanity requires our best effort. Since there is always more than we can comprehend from our human perspective, we must return to the text over and over to be enriched by the treasures that God has revealed to us. Because we are dealing with God’s mystery, our Bible reading journey is never ending and will always be full of surprises.

**Recognizing the Bible as a Human Composition**

Believers who accept the sacred character of the Bible text approach their reading and use of the text differently than do nonbelievers. But accepting the sacred character of the biblical text does not excuse us from following all the procedures demanded for skillful interpretation. Although the Bible may be a divinely inspired text, our personal interpretations of it are not. They depend on our own reading ability, skills and effort.

As a written text, the Bible works like any book. It is a human composition by an author for an audience in a particular place and time. It must be read and interpreted by using the various methods that careful and capable readers have devised. The biblical texts demand that we use all our skill to read and interpret properly the meanings inscribed within them. Reading and interpreting ancient texts also demand special attention to their textual, historical, literary and sociopolitical issues. To read texts adequately, we must consider all of these historical and critical factors.

Perhaps the most important factor we must deal in reading the Bible with is the historical and cultural gap between the past and the present. When the texts were first written, the authors and readers shared the same situation. Interpreting what the author meant was not as difficult in this shared world. When an author and audience share the same world of experience, fewer presuppositions are needed to discover the meaning that the author is trying
to communicate. This is why reading our daily newspaper or a contemporary novel seems so effortless. But as the ancient world of the author (then) and that of later readers (now) become distanced either by history or by culture (or, as in the case of the Bible, by both), difficulties in reading soon begin to emerge. (For more about how scripture scholars help us overcome these historical, cultural and language difficulties in reading the Bible, see chapter 9.)

“Being faithful to the Church means resolutely finding one’s place in the mainstream of the great Tradition that, under the guidance of the magisterium and assured of the Holy Spirit’s special assistance, has recognized the canonical writings as the word addressed by God to his people and has never ceased meditating on them and discovering their inexhaustible riches.”

—POPE JOHN PAUL II
Address to the Pontifical Biblical Commission (April 23, 1993)

In the nineteenth century, a major shift in human thinking began when Napoleon’s conquest of Egypt brought European scholars to a brand-new awareness of the meaning of history. They began to realize that the past was not just an earlier version of today, but that the peoples and cultures of the past were essentially different from those now. To deal with this new historical awareness, scholars devised, and have continued to refine, methods of overcoming this historical gap by using the evidence of ancient artifacts and texts to explore the differences between the present and the past.

In the twentieth century, another important shift occurred in our understanding of culture. As anthropologists traveled the globe observing all the various peoples and their ways of life, they concluded that culture is not something some people have (the “civilized”) and others do not. They recognized that every group, no matter how “primitive,” has a culture or system around which it organizes its life as a society. Since culture is essential for human existence, it appears in various forms in every human community.

These two pivotal changes have had tremendous effects on our approach to reading and interpreting the Bible. We now know that for an adequate reading or interpretation of a text, we need a method to understand the historical and cultural situation of the original author and his audience. This method, called the historical-critical method, searches for what the text meant
in its original situation. Only through the use of this method can we hope to bridge the chasm that separates the ancient historical and cultural world of the author and the modern technological and cultural world of today’s readers.

**The Catholic Approach:**

**Seeking Both the Divine and Human Meanings**

Our Catholic beliefs, which affirm what we consider to be true about the Bible, distinguish our approach from that of nonbelievers. The category of “nonbelievers” includes not only those from non-Christian religious traditions but also those literary critics who appreciate the Bible only as influential literature and scientific historians who share no conviction about the Bible’s religious truths. Our approach also differs from naively literalistic readers (often referred to as “fundamentalists”) who tend not to acknowledge any historical or cultural distance between the ancient situation and our own. Finally, our Catholic approach differs from the approach of readers who deny or downplay the role of community tradition in the transmission and interpretation of divine revelation and leave all meaning to the whim of individuals.

Our Catholic approach deliberately reads the Bible in relation to our Church’s tradition. We do not believe that all truth is found in the Bible. But we do believe that the truth that is found there is especially significant because it reveals God’s hidden mystery and what God wants for us and our world.

Within the Catholic tradition, the Bible has never been considered a document meant only for scholarly examination. From the beginning, Scripture was used to clarify and deepen our relationship with God and with one another. Whatever the fruits of scholarship might be, they become useful when they serve to help us in our relationship with God.

When we read “within the tradition,” we accept the guidance of the community and not just our individual, private reading. The Bible was the Church’s book long before it became ours! So to read the Bible as a Catholic means to be aware, at least in general, of the guidelines that the Church has provided. These guidelines come to us through the Church’s formal teachings or statements about Scripture and by the use of Scripture in other documents and in the Church’s worship. These Church guidelines have always
stressed the need for balance in attending to both the sacred and the human dimensions of the biblical text.

**Early Guidelines from Church Practice**

Because the Church has always considered the Bible to be more than merely a history book or a literary text, it has always demanded that we use more than historical and literary techniques for reading and interpretation. That is, if we are to discover the sacred or fuller meaning of Scripture, we must go beyond mere historical and literary study.

The Church has always read the Bible as a book whose meaning cannot ever be exhausted by scholarly investigation. Because of this, the Church has never considered that the literal sense—the human author’s original intended meaning—encompasses all that the Bible means. As God’s revealed Word, the Bible refers to a more-than-human reality. Thus it can legitimately be interpreted in ways that are grounded in the literal sense but go beyond it.

> “With the words of scripture, we feed our faith, we lift up our hope, we confirm our confidence.”
> 
> —ST. BASIL THE GREAT (d. 379)

In order to get beyond the literal or historical level of meaning, early Church interpreters from Paul onward resorted to interpreting the Bible in a symbolic way. The basic assumption was that the biblical words referred not merely to the human realities that they described but also to invisible divine realities as well. The Bible was thus understood as an extended symbol, or allegory, that connected the biblical text and the divine reality of God. Allegorical methods were devised to discover these fuller spiritual meanings.

These allegorical methods worked by connecting selected details about biblical persons, events, and themes with later persons and events. As the connections were made, new and surprising meanings emerged. For example, for the early Christians, events from the Old Testament story of God’s relationship with the Jews became types, or models, that foreshadowed later events in the New Testament story of God’s relationship with the Christians.
So Jesus could be understood by seeing him as the fulfillment of several Old Testament persons. He was a new community former like Moses, a new royal leader like David, a new wisdom teacher like Solomon, a prophet like Elijah.

As more complicated problems arose and simple allegory was no longer adequate, more sophisticated ways of seeking the spiritual meanings were developed. Throughout the Middle Ages, the desire to go beyond the basic literal sense that the human author intended took the form of more precise and elaborate methods. Students learned these methods and remembered them through the use of a famous Latin couplet:

\begin{quote}
Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria
Moralis quid agas, quo tendas anagogia.
\end{quote}

(“The literal sense shows what happened, the allegorical what to believe, the moral what you are to do, the anagogical where you are headed.”)

The literal sense concerns the events described in the text. In their pre-scientific understanding of history, medieval scholars assumed these events to be directly factual and thus the foundation for all the other meanings. Once literal meanings were understood, further spiritual meanings could be derived because the literal sense pointed to divine events outside the text.

Connecting the text and divine events is the foundation of the allegorical sense, which relates everything in the text to the reality of Chris and his redemptive mission. Thus the allegorical sense unfolds Scripture’s spiritual meaning and shows us what to believe in that everything points to Christ.

Another spiritual sense is the moral sense, which shows us what we are to do. Since God constantly calls us to conversion, this moral meaning points us toward our own response to God’s mystery in our lives. The events of Jesus’ life become the pattern for our life. By applying the moral sense of a text, we become aware of how God is saving us through Christ and what we ought to do in response.

The final spiritual sense is the anagogical sense, which shows us where we are going. The word anagogical means “leading upward” and indicates the final heavenly goal toward which we strive. This meaning serves to build up our hope and reminds us of our ultimate goal of being with God.
There are many examples of these four senses, or meanings, of Scripture, but a simple illustration might the four ways of looking at the city of Jerusalem. The literal sense understands Jerusalem as the historical city in Judea; the allegorical sense understands Jerusalem as the Church; the moral sense understands Jerusalem as the Christian soul longing for God; and the anagogical sense understands Jerusalem as the heavenly city to which we are journeying.

“All the senses of Holy Scripture are built on the literal sense, from which alone, and not from allegorical passages, arguments can be drawn. The spiritual sense brings nothing needful to faith which is not elsewhere clearly conveyed by the literal sense.”

—ST. THOMAS AQUINAS (d. 1274)
Summa Theologiae, I:1:10

This fourfold method dominated the interpretation of texts until the rise of the more scientific and historical techniques devised in the nineteenth century for the interpretation of ancient texts. These newer methods caused much controversy and were only slowly encouraged and finally approved by the Church’s teaching authorities. For the last two centuries, this confrontation between the Church and the scientifically based, historical-critical scholars about how to interpret the Bible was the dominant biblical issue.

Modern Catholic Guidelines for Scripture Interpretation
As mentioned earlier, a major controversy over the use of modern scientific and historical methods for examining the biblical texts rocked the Church in the nineteenth century. The nineteenth century was a difficult time both politically and intellectually for the Catholic Church. Beginning with the French Revolution (1789), bitter disagreements had severed the relationship between the Church and many European states, which had endured in Europe for roughly fifteen hundred years (since the Roman emperor Constantine recognized Christianity as a legitimate religion in AD 313). Responding to the hostility directed toward it, the Church assumed an equally hostile attitude toward the modern world and the political, social and intellectual changes that it was advocating.
By the 1890s, European nationalisms had so drastically restricted the Church’s political power that the Church’s voice was limited primarily to issues of private morality, not public politics. In the intellectual field, the experimental method of science had become the model of all human knowing. Since scientific thinking was equated with reason, faith was discounted as irrational and considered merely a matter of personal feeling. Scientific methods of biblical scholarship, not faith, were considered the best way of determining the Bible’s meaning.

In 1893, Pope Leo XIII wrote the first modern papal letter, or encyclical, offering specific directives about the Catholic approach to Scripture. His letter, called Providentissimus Deus (A Most Provident God), attempted to initiate a cautious reconciliation between the tradition of Catholic biblical scholarship and the developing scientific approach to biblical criticism. (This and other papal encyclicals and documents from the Pontifical Biblical Commission can be found online at the Vatican’s website, www.vatican.va).

Leo respected learning and wanted Bible scholars to use what was best in the new scientific approaches to biblical interpretation. But he also warned them to be aware of the dangers that led scholars to positions contrary to the Church’s official teachings. His proposals guided Catholic scholars through the difficult years of the first half of the twentieth century.

“The language of the Bible is employed to express, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, many things which are beyond the power and scope of human reason—that is to say, divine mysteries and all that is related to them. There is sometimes in such passages a fullness and a hidden depth of meaning which the letter hardly expresses and which the laws of interpretation hardly warrant. Moreover, the literal sense itself frequently admits other senses, adapted to illustrate dogma or to confirm morality.”

—POPE LEO XIII
Providentissimus Deus (1893)

Leo wanted most of all to encourage biblical scholars, and his letter inaugurated a modern dialogue between Catholic biblical scholarship and the scientific methods of interpreting texts. Although his primary emphasis was on using scholarship to defend against attacks on the faith, Leo also stressed the need to search for the meaning of the biblical texts through a careful
historical investigation of the origin and transmission of biblical writings. He also recognized that there are depths of meaning that even the original authors might not have perceived. He encouraged Catholic scholars to rely not merely on the Latin Vulgate translation of the Bible that had been used for almost fifteen centuries but also to investigate the available Hebrew and Greek versions.

In 1943, to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Leo’s letter, Pope Pius XII wrote a commemorative encyclical called Divino Afflante Spiritu (Inspired by the Divine Spirit). This letter carries Leo’s cautious beginnings to a full-fledged endorsement of the use of modern scholarly methods for interpreting Scripture. In particular, Pius not only encouraged but required scholars to use the biblical texts in their original Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek languages, together with a careful historical and literary study to determine their original meaning. This approach demanded both an understanding of the author’s intended meaning (this is the literal sense for scholars—but notice that this is different from the medieval literal sense, which referred to the text’s description of events, and from the popular usage referring to what the words say) and an awareness of the deeper theological meanings (the spiritual sense) relevant to the Church’s traditional doctrines and moral teaching.

“The aim of scriptural interpretation is not simply to explain ancient texts, to relate the acts in a critical way, or to get back to the original, primitive form of some sacred text. The prime duty of the exegete is to present the message of revelation to the people of God; to lay bare the meaning of the word of God in itself and in its relationship to contemporary humanity; and to provide people with access to God’s word above and beyond the enveloping semantic signs and cultural syntheses, which are far removed from the culture and problems of our own day.”

—POPE PAUL VI
Address to the Pontifical Biblical Commission (March 14, 1974)

This letter fostered an enormous revival of Catholic interest in Scripture. Using the modern methods endorsed by the pope, Catholic biblical scholars after World War II finally began to take their place among the foremost Scripture scholars in the world. Their books, articles and commentaries, together with newer and more accurate Catholic translations of the Bible, finally began to open up to the laity the long-neglected riches of Scripture.
The Church’s cautious approval of historical scholarship as the necessary tool for unlocking the meaning of Scripture culminated in the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)* of Vatican Council II (1962–65). With the highest possible degree of teaching authority, this Council solemnly defined the Church’s basic theological teaching (dogma) about the Bible and provided guidelines for how it must be interpreted. This document, more than any other, invites us to step confidently into the future from the firm foundation of the trustworthy guidelines accumulated from centuries of past Church tradition and the significant accomplishments of modern scholarship. Reading and studying this document is the best way to learn what the Church teaches about Scripture and how to interpret it.

This conciliar teaching of Vatican II was further elaborated on by the Pontifical Biblical Commission (the official group of Scripture scholars chosen by the Pope to help the teaching office or *magisterium* of the Church in biblical matters) in their *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993). This publication commemorated the hundredth anniversary of Pope Leo’s letter promoting modern biblical studies. In this very important document, the commission first identifies in detail the various modern scholarly methods and approaches for interpreting Scripture, including their specific contributions and dangers, then outlines the characteristics of Catholic interpretation and finally describes the interpretation of the Bible in the life of the Church.

The different methods and approaches used for biblical scholarship grow out of the diverse questions that curious and competent readers ask of the texts. Each method and approach arises to solve specific questions and concerns. The word *method* means a way of getting from “here” to “there.” Methods of Bible interpretation help us get from the strange, ancient world with its unfamiliar language, customs, and ideas, to our present world.

The Pontifical Biblical Commission reminds us that there is, strictly speaking, no Catholic method of scriptural interpretation. There is a Catholic approach, however, which links the biblical text to the tradition of the Church and holds together our modern scientific culture and our Judeo-Christian religious tradition. The Catholic approach also demands, as the context for all understanding, a faith perspective that is rooted in a relationship with God.
During the last half-century God’s Word has been opened to all the faithful in an unprecedented way. Thanks to the promotion of biblical studies by Popes Leo and Pius and the bishops of Vatican Council II, we have the chance now to hear God’s Word with reverence and proclaim it with faith in ways that were practically impossible just a century ago.

Throughout the centuries the Church’s guidelines have followed the broad middle path of tried-and-true methods of interpretation. As in so many other areas, the Church was seldom first to devise new interpretive methods or to approve them. The Church’s teaching office was content to “make haste slowly” and test things before approving them. Like a skilled river pilot on the Mississippi, the Church’s guidelines recognize that dangers lurk most often when one slips out of the main channel and glides into the shallows near the shore. Whether one moves too far to the right toward naively spiritual readings or to the left toward simply historical readings, the religious results can be disastrous. The safe passage is always in the deep and smooth-running channel where both dimensions are affirmed.

Moreover, since the Church was always primarily concerned with the demands of practical life and worship rather than with mere scholarship, no matter how theoretically brilliant the methods and conclusions of secular scholarship might have been, the Church carefully evaluated them in the light of its mission to guard and proclaim the gospel truth.

Questions for Reflection and Group Discussion

1. **Explain to a friend why our Catholic beliefs about Scripture guide our Catholic approach to reading it.**

2. **Why does our modern sense of history demand more specialized methods for understanding ancient texts?**

3. **Explain the difference between what we usually mean when we say, “take something literally” and what biblical scholars mean when they seek the Bible’s “literal sense.”**

4. **Using the fourfold senses of Scripture, how might you interpret the meaning of Mary, the mother of God? Or the cross of Jesus?**
PART TWO

Preparing for Your Journey
In Paul we read about Christ: “In whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” See what he says: all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Not that some are and some are not; but all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. But they are hidden. So what is in him is not lacking to him, even though it be hidden from us.

But if all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Christ, we must ask why they are hidden. It is our part to seek, his to grant what we ask, ours to make a beginning, his to bring it to completion, ours to offer what we can, his to finish what we cannot.

—ST. JEROME
Dialogue against Pelagius (AD 415)
We would never travel to a new country without first having some idea of its terrain. To do this, we rely first on general topographical maps that show the geographical configurations of mountains, plains, coastlines, and the major rivers. Then we find our way using more detailed maps that show cities, towns and their connecting roads. Our reading journey also requires some awareness of the Bible’s topography—how it all fits together structurally—and then more detailed directives for helping us go along specific paths.

In unfamiliar countryside, besides a map it also helps to have a compass or a Global Positioning System (GPS) to fix our location and keep our orientation for the journey constantly on target. Just as these work with coordinates to determine our location, so we can fix our attention on the three essentials of the communication situation—the author, the audience and the text that mediates between them. We will always have some basic questions about these to keep ourselves properly directed on our journey.

A Map of Our Bible’s Overall Structure
The two great divisions in our Christian Bible are the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament is the collection of sacred books that the early Christians adopted from Judaism. The New Testament is the collection of our specifically Christian writings. The word testament here is an older English word for a covenant relationship.

Since many scholars today think that the old/new designation has negative connotations, they are experimenting with other “value-free” terminology. So some scholars call the Old Testament the First or Prior Testament and the New Testament the Second or Later Testament. Others draw the distinction between the Hebrew, or Jewish, Scriptures and the Christian
Scriptures. Nevertheless, I retain the more familiar terms *old* and *new* because they still remain the most conventional way of designating the Bible’s major Christian parts and are the ones still used in most Bibles.

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**A MAP OF THE JEWISH BIBLE**

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**The Christian Old Testament**

The Christian Old Testament is adapted from the Jewish sacred Scriptures. The Jews divided their sacred texts into three general categories: The Law (*Torah*), the Prophets (*Nevi’im*), and the Writings (*Ketuvim*). The first letters of these Hebrew terms form the acronym TNK (*Tanakh*), which is what Jewish scholars prefer to call their Old Testament.

So in the time of Jesus, one could refer to the Bible as the law, the prophets and the psalms (Luke 24:44) or as the law and the prophets (see, for example, Matthew 5:17; 7:12; 22:40; John 1:45; Acts 13:15; 24:14; 28:23; Romans 3:21), or, more simply, as just the law (Luke 10:26; John 10:34).

Early Christians used these three general groupings but rearranged their order so that the Prophets would come last. In this way the Old Testament seemed to point directly to the coming of Christ that was recorded in the
New Testament. When the Bible was translated into Latin, the order of books was further modified into the arrangement found in our modern Bible. The three Jewish groups of books are now redistributed into four sections—the Pentateuch, the historical books, the wisdom books and the prophetic books.

The Pentateuch (from the Greek, “five scrolls or books”) contains the first five books of the Bible. These are the same books that the Jews call the Law or Torah (Hebrew for “instruction”). They narrate the basic story of God’s search for an appropriate covenant partner, from the creation of Adam to Abraham to Abraham’s descendants in Egypt under Moses. About 1250 BC, God liberated these people from their oppression in Egypt and led them for forty years through the wilderness until they reached the Promised Land.

“I am convinced that for a Christian today in this complex, difficult and secularized Western society it is practically impossible to persevere in the faith without drawing sustenance, even on one’s own, from Scripture.”

—CARDINAL CARLO MARTINI, S.J.

“Teaching the Scriptures to a Diocese,” Priests and People (June 1992)

Woven into these narratives are descriptions of the covenant ceremonies and the detailed law codes that instructed the people about their obligations and behavior in relation to God and to one another. The Pentateuch as we have it in our Bibles, which assumed its final written form only about four hundred years before Christ, reflects the results of several centuries of oral transmission and Jewish editing.

Then come the sixteen historical books that tell the story of Israel during the millennium before Christ. “Historical” is a traditional label rather than a scholarly conclusion. The books of Tobit, Esther and Judith, for example, are fictionalized narratives that demonstrate how ancient historians taught their audiences by focusing on persons as examples to emulate rather than just establishing abstract “facts” the way many historians do today.

In this historical section, the books of Joshua and Judges recount the experiences of the Jewish people in the two centuries beginning with their entry into the Promised Land and ending with the founding of the kingdom under King Saul. The books of Samuel and Kings continue the story by focusing on the kings who ruled between approximately 1000 BC and 587 BC, when the
Jewish kingdom was destroyed by the Babylonian Empire and the leaders and elites were sent into exile in Babylon for fifty years.

The later books of Chronicles retell the history given in Samuel and Kings but from a different perspective that explains how God allowed the exile. Ezra and Nehemiah recount the people’s heroic efforts of restoration after the exile. Finally, the books of Maccabees tell of the people’s resistance and revolt against their Greek overlords during the second century before Christ.

The historical books are then followed by the seven wisdom books. Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Wisdom and Sirach contain the truths and traditions that constituted the foundation for a worldly education among the elite. Parts of these books have parallels in Egyptian and other ancient Near Eastern literature. The poetic Song of Songs is a love song attributed to King Solomon. The Psalms, like our hymn books today, is a collection of 150 songs that were used for Jewish worship and personal prayer. They express the whole spectrum of the covenant people’s emotions in their relationship with God.

The final section of our Catholic Old Testament has eighteen books of the prophets. Although the books are not grouped chronologically, their work spans the period from about 750 BC to 350 BC. The longest books are those of the four major prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel—along with Lamentations, considered to be written by Jeremiah, and Baruch, written by Jeremiah’s secretary. Then the twelve books of the minor prophets gather together the wide variety and styles of prophetic messages from God to the Jewish people. These prophets are called “minor” not in importance but only because they are shorter in length than the books of the four major prophets.

The New Testament

All Christian Bibles have the same number (twenty-seven) and arrangement of the New Testament books. They include first the four gospels, in the traditional (but not chronological) order of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Matthew was placed first because in the ancient Christian tradition, it was thought that this gospel was originally composed in Aramaic before it was translated into the Greek version we have today. Then Mark and Luke used Matthew’s Greek gospel to create their own versions by deleting and adding their own community’s material. John’s gospel was always recognized as
relying on different traditions to assume it unique shape. Most scholars today think that not Matthew but Mark was actually the first gospel to be written and that both Matthew and Luke then revised his version in different ways with additional sources to create their versions of the gospel.

Then comes the Acts of the Apostles, which is actually the companion volume to Luke’s Gospel (a connection that is now usually missed because our organization separates them). After the gospels come the epistles or letters, beginning with those of Paul (arranged in the order of length rather than chronology), then the other pastoral and catholic letters (some of which read more like homilies or doctrinal treatises). The final book is Revelation, sometimes called the Apocalypse (the Greek word for “revelation”).

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**A MAP OF THE CATHOLIC BIBLE**

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<td>Jude</td>
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* indicates a Catholic deuterocanonical book, which Protestants consider non-canonical and do not include in their Bibles, except sometimes in a special section called the Apocrypha.
Why Catholic and Protestant Old Testaments Differ

Although Catholic and Protestant Old Testaments are arranged in the same four groups (law, prophets, wisdom, history), the number of books in each group differs. Catholic Bibles have forty-six Old Testament books but most Protestant Bibles have thirty-nine. Thus Catholics and Protestants do not agree on the same canon, and each group labels books from the viewpoint of its own canon. Books that belong inside the canon are called canonical. Those that are outside the canon are called apocryphal (from the Greek word meaning “hidden”). There are thirty-nine books that Catholics and Protestants agree are canonical. There are many other books that both groups reject from their canons and label as apocryphal or outside the canon.

“It is important for every Catholic to realize that the Church produced the New Testament, not vice versa. The Bible did not come down from heaven, whole and intact, given by the Holy Spirit. Just as the experience and faith of Israel developed its sacred books, so was the early Christian Church the matrix of the New Testament. The Bible, then, is the Church’s book. The New Testament did not come before the Church, but from the Church.”

—U.S. BISHOPS

“A Pastoral Statement for Catholics on Biblical Fundamentalism” (1987)

But there are seven books and parts of two others whose relation to the canon is disputed by Catholic and Protestants. Catholics include them as canonical; Protestants reject them as apocryphal (not canonical). Catholics identify these books—Wisdom, Sirach, Baruch, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Tobit, Judith, and parts of Daniel—as deuterocanonical (Greek for “second canon”), which means that they are canonical (as Catholics claim) but recognizes that their inclusion in the canon has often been disputed (as Protestants note).

The dispute rests on several factors. Until the second and third centuries after Christ, there was no firmly established and universally agreed-upon list of sacred books that formed the Jewish canon. So in the first century there existed among Jews—and consequently among Christians who adopted the Greek translation of the Jewish Bible—discrepancies about what belonged in the canon and what did not.

Jews in the Palestinian homeland accepted as sacred only books in the Hebrew language. But Jews outside of the homeland, who relied on the
Greek translation of the Jewish Scriptures called the Septuagint, included some books in Greek or Aramaic that the Hebrew purists would not recognize as sacred. Thus when Greek-speaking Christians (who by the end of the first century constituted the majority of all Christians) adopted the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament, they also accepted its extra Greek books.

“In the immense matter contained in the Sacred Books—legislative, historical, sapiential and prophetical—there are but a few texts whose sense has been defined by the authority of the Church, nor are those more numerous about which the teaching of the holy fathers is unanimous. There remain, therefore, many things, and of the greatest importance, in the discussion and exposition of which the skill and genius of Catholic commentators may and ought to be freely exercised, so that each may contribute his part to the advantage of all, to the continued progress of the sacred doctrine and to the defense and honor of the Church.”

—POPE PIUS XII
Divino Afflante Spiritu (1943), #47

In the fourth century, when St. Jerome translated the Bible into Latin, he included the additional Greek Septuagint books. So for the next thousand years—until the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century—the number and arrangement of the Old Testament books, as accepted in Roman Catholic Christianity, remained constant.

When the discrepancy between the Hebrew canon and the Greek canon was rediscovered in the sixteenth century, many (but not all) Protestant groups for various different reasons opted to follow the Hebrew canon rather than the Greek. So they removed the seven deuterocanonical books from their Bibles and usually grouped them with other apocryphal/non-canonical books in an appendix, as many Protestant Bibles still do today.

**Signposts along the Way: Chapter and Verse**

The Bible text we have now for our journey is also carefully marked with helpful trail markers. Before printing, when the Bible was only copied by hand, finding your place in a handwritten manuscript was very difficult. Since every handwritten manuscript was different, a reader would have to be very familiar with a particular manuscript to be able to find where any passage began. Before reading, especially for the liturgy, a reader would have to prepare the
reading to determine exactly what the text said. Although this seems strange to us, it was absolutely necessary because ancient scrolls contained few aids for reading such as punctuation, paragraphs or word divisions.

In Hebrew texts, words were separated but vowels were not written. So reading the text aloud was only way to determine the meaning of the words. Until the words were vocalized, the vowels were indefinite and the meaning remained ambiguous. For example, if we did the same thing in English, we might come across the sentence: LRD S GD FR JWS. By supplying the vowels for these consonants, we could come up with “The Lord is God for Jews,” “Lard is good for jaws” or even “Lordy, see Gad free Jews.” Only the context of the words would allow us to decide which meaning was most appropriate.

Unlike Hebrew texts, Greek texts included the vowels but were written in all capital letters without any breaks between the words. Imagine how hard it would be to read a text like this: GODWASRECONCILINGTHEWORLDTOHIMSELFINCHRISTNOTCOUNTINGTHEIRTRESPASSESAGAINSTTHEMANDENTRUSTINGTOUSTRUMENTHEMESSAGEOFRECONCILIATION (2 Corinthians 5:19, NABRE). To help their oral performance, ancient readers often marked off the breaks between words with tiny dots, or “points.” These “pointed texts” now provide clues for scholars about the most intelligible way to divide these texts into the right words.

To aid reading and facilitate finding scripture passages more quickly and easily in the hand-copied medieval manuscripts, Archbishop of Canterbury Stephen Langton first divided up the Bible into our familiar chapter and verse format in the early 1300s. Once Bibles were printed after 1546 (the first major book printed with movable type by Johannes Gutenberg was the Bible), the format of the Bible text was greatly standardized (his two column format still remains the standard one for Bibles today) and more clarity was gained when words were separated for easier and faster reading and punctuation added.

Once the Bible books were printed with chapter and verse numbers, the whole Bible could be easily navigated by knowing which book, chapter, and verse you were reading. Cross-referencing also became easier because one could simply identify any biblical quote by citing its chapter and verse numbers.

Another help for citing the Bible comes from abbreviating the names of the Bible books. Although these abbreviations are somewhat standardized,
look at the introductory material in your Bible to find the specific abbreviations that it uses. Annotated Bibles contain many other supplementary helps for readers. These often include introductions to the books, chapter or paragraph headings that help us find our way, cross-references to similar passages of Scripture and scholarly footnotes to help with the difficult passages.

DECIPHERING A BIBLICAL CITATION

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<th>Reference</th>
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<td>Genesis chapter 4, verses 3 and 11</td>
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<td>Gen 4:3—11:1</td>
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Remember that these additional helps are not part of the sacred text and cannot be treated as revealed, inspired or inerrant. They are only as reliable and trustworthy as the scholars who provide them. The most important advantage of using an annotated Bible is that if the notes are done well, we have immediate help with problematic passages and do not have to stop our reading to go search for information. You will be surprised how often your questions will be answered because the scholars have already tackled them.

Our Compass for Orientation: Six Essential Questions

In unfamiliar territory, a compass or GPS helps us locate where we are and find our way. The compass works because it is constantly oriented to the North Pole and a GPS works by coordinating its position to four or more space satellites. For our Bible journey, our coordinates for easier location are the six essential questions that must be answered by inquisitive readers about any text. They can be summarized like this:

- Who (the author)
- addresses whom (the audience)
- in what circumstances (the situation)
- in what way (form)
- with what message (content)
- for what reason (function)?
Ordinarily, the introduction to each biblical book gives enough background so that you can read it with an awareness of what the biblical author intended to communicate to the original audience. These introductions usually provide a brief summary of the scholarly conclusions about the identity of the author and the original audience, their historical situation, why the book was written, what literary form was used, and a summary of the book’s content and message.

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<th>Historical Issues</th>
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Every reader must be aware of these questions as he or she seeks to understand the meaning of the text. If these questions are neglected or inadequately answered, readers can easily lose their way or come up with meanings that the author never intended to communicate. Even small errors can affect how we interpret what we read, much like being a few compass degrees off may seem insignificant at first but can drastically change where we end up after miles of traveling.

Questions for Reflection and Group Discussion

1. Why would Christians call the Jewish Scriptures the Old Testament and the Christian Scriptures the New Testament? What does this terminology reveal about the Jews’ and Christians’ differing viewpoints on their relationship with God?

2. Explain to a Protestant friend why his or her Bible does not have the same books as does your Catholic Bible.

3. What do Catholics mean when they use the terms apocryphal and deuterocanonical?

4. Find the following references in your Bible: Ps 85:9; Lk 8:21; Ex 24:1-11; Dt 17:14-20; Neh 8; Is 52:13–53:12; Mt 5–7; 2 Pt 3:8; Est A12 (NABRE); Jer 12:7-13; Eccl 12:11-13.
Our conveniently bound Bible is really a collection of books that comes to us translated from its various original languages. This would have been immediately obvious to the Jews and earliest Christians, whose Scriptures would have consisted of a closet full of papyrus rolls. Each one would have been wrapped up and tied with a separate small piece of papyrus to identify the scroll, just as a dust jacket does on books today. This would help readers find the scroll they wanted to read aloud in their community gathering.

Books in the ancient world were published by copying them individually by hand (hence, the word *manuscript*, Latin for *handwritten*). Because there was no such thing as copyright, authors usually expected and even encouraged the reproduction of their writings. Authors wrote primarily for honor and fame rather than for money, and reproductions of their manuscripts enhanced their reputations because more people read or memorized them.

A manuscript was usually available to almost anyone who wished to make a copy. Of course, the quality of the copies often varied, depending on the skill of the copyist. Consequently, no two manuscripts were alike. The size of the handwriting and the arrangement of material on the page often differed, and there were mistakes in copying as well as deliberate changes to the text. For purposes of reference or copying, authors often kept an authentic version (an “authorized version” of their work in the private library of their patron or in a more public city library or church archive.

**What Manuscripts Do We Have?**
We do not have the original author’s manuscript (called an *autograph*) of any biblical book, only copies of copies of copies. But Bible scholars have at their
disposal more manuscripts of the Bible than of any other ancient document. For the New Testament, there are more than five thousand manuscripts in Greek, eight thousand in Latin, and one thousand in other languages. These sources vary; some are but tiny fragments of a few words, and others contain the whole New Testament. Searching the Internet will allow you to view images of many of these ancient manuscripts (see for example the Greek Language and Linguistics website (www.greek-language.com/Manuscripts.html) which provides information and links to many websites providing information and pictures about ancient Greek biblical manuscripts.

“Easy access to sacred Scripture should be provided for all the Christian faithful. That is why the Church from the very beginning accepted as her own that very ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament which is called the Septuagint, and she has always given a place of honor to other Eastern translations and Latin ones, especially the Latin translation known as the Vulgate. But since the word of God should be accessible at all times, the Church by her authority and with maternal concern sees to it that suitable and correct translations are made into different languages, especially from the original texts of the sacred books. And should the opportunity arise and the Church authorities approve, if these translations are produced in cooperation with the separated brethren as well, all Christians will be able to use them.”

—VATICAN COUNCIL II
Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, #22

Until fifty years ago, our oldest manuscripts of the Old Testament dated back only about a thousand years. But thanks to recent discoveries, our oldest manuscripts now include more than two hundred from the period of about 250 BC to AD 135. The most famous are the Dead Sea Scrolls, found in Palestine in 1947 at Qumran near the Dead Sea hidden in caves cut into the cliffs. They are almost a thousand years older than any Old Testament manuscripts scholars had ever been able to use in the translation of the text. They include either the whole or part of almost every Old Testament book, commentaries on these biblical books and other non-biblical writings that scholars think were probably part of the library of the Essene community. These Jewish sectarians lived in a kind of monastery at Qumran, which was destroyed in AD 68 by the Romans. (You can see many images and learn more about these manuscripts at www.deadseascrolls.org.il).
By leaping back almost a thousand years earlier in manuscript evidence to the first century, scholars have reinforced their confidence in the Hebrew text that they have relied on for modern translations. The close similarity of these newly discovered texts to later copies demonstrates how carefully and accurately the Hebrew text was preserved through twenty-plus centuries of copying. When scholars compared the modern Hebrew text with these ancient ones, they confirmed how close the modern Old Testament is to the text discovered in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The task of textual scholars is to comb through these thousands of surviving manuscripts to determine their types, their dates of composition, the extent of their geographical distribution and the relationships that exist among similar manuscripts. In particular, scholars are interested in determining which manuscript was copied from which and how variations introduced by one manuscript got transmitted to later copies. Scholars compare the numerous textual variations to identify which changes were unintentional and which ones were intentionally introduced by the copyists. The goal of all this textual study is to approximate as closely as possible what they think was the original version of the text.

The text of the Bible that we rely on today for our translations does not directly correspond to any single ancient manuscript. It has been pieced together using thousands of scholarly judgments about what the original text must have been. Despite all these textual variations, the amazing thing is that no essential Christian truth or doctrine has been put in doubt by any of these manuscript differences.

**What Do Manuscripts Look Like?**

The original manuscripts of the Bible were probably written on papyrus, which looks much like a brownish, slightly stiffer version of our modern paper. Papyrus plants grow plentifully in the marshy areas of the Nile River in Egypt. The stalk, triangular in shape and ten to twelve feet long, can easily be stripped and its pithy center (called *biblos* in Greek) cut into small strips. These strips are then laid on a flat surface, first vertically and then horizontally. The two layers are then pressed, dried and smoothed with a shell to create a single sheet usually six to nine inches high and twelve to eighteen inches wide.
Several sheets (typically about twenty) would then be slightly overlapped and pressed together to form a roll. For a longer text, several rolls could be strung together to make a scroll (biblion in Greek). The maximum length for a scroll before it became completely unwieldy for the reader to roll and unroll was about thirty feet. Matthew’s Gospel, for example, would fill a scroll of about this length.

Writing was usually done only on the horizontally laid side, and the scroll was then rolled so that the writing was inside. Occasionally, either because papyrus was lacking or because the author had so much to say, scrolls were written on both sides. (See the book of Revelation 5:1 where God’s scroll was double-sided and fastened with seven wax seals.)

The unwieldy character of larger scrolls probably led the early Christians to adopt the codex, or leaf form of books instead of the more common scrolls. Originally, a codex was made by hinging together two blocks of wood. The blocks were hollowed out in the center and wax was put into the hollow part. The wax was written on, then smoothed out so that it could be used over and over. Since the wax erased easily, the codex was often used by students to practice their writing. A codex of papyrus was made by folding the sheets down the middle and sewing them together at the fold, much like our modern books are made.

Several advantages of the codex might have made it preferable to the scroll. First, the length of a book was no longer restricted to a set length, as it was in the scroll form. A codex could encompass more material simply by adding more and more pages as needed. What was impossible for the scroll was now possible in this new format. The entire Bible, for example, could be put together into a single large codex instead of on many separate scrolls.

Second, since both sides of the pages were used for writing, the codex was more economical because fewer papyrus sheets needed to be purchased. Thus more text could be fitted onto fewer pages and more material could be stored in this codex form.

Third, the codex was easier to hold and thus eliminated the cumbersome rolling and unrolling of the scroll. Finding a passage on a scroll would be like locating a sentence on a cassette tape by winding and rewinding until you found it. The codex made finding Scripture references much more
convenient than fumbling around with a scroll. Most important for Christians, it allowed easy cross-referencing from one section of the codex to another. One could move from Old to New Testament or from one book to another simply by sticking a finger or bookmark into the codex.

Another development Christians favored was the shift from papyrus to parchment for their books. Since papyrus was not very suitable for frequently used books, Christians soon switched to the more durable parchment—animal skins that had been cut into suitable sizes for pages and specially treated to receive writing. Since parchment was often expensive and hard to obtain, sometimes it would be erased by scraping and then used again. A manuscript written on reused parchment is called a palimpsest. More than fifty of our biblical manuscripts from the fourth to the tenth centuries are palimpsests. Using ultraviolet or infrared light, modern researchers can detect the older, underlying text that can often provide important clues for textual research.

Exactly when the transition was made from papyrus to parchment and from scroll to codex is not known. But the evidence suggests that by the fourth century Christians used parchment almost exclusively for biblical manuscripts—a practice that lasted for almost a thousand years until the advent of printing on paper. Although we possess many papyrus fragments and partial texts, the most important biblical manuscripts are written on parchment in the codex form.

**Ancient and Medieval Translations**

Christians always focused on the use texts for worship and guidance rather than just prizing them for their sacred character or literary style. Thus manuscripts were not only copied but sometimes translated into other languages.

The oldest Jewish texts were written in Hebrew and collected over several centuries. As Hebrew gave way to Aramaic and as Greek became the dominant language of the Mediterranean world after the conquests of Alexander the Great (d. 323 BC), so many Jews were living outside the Holy Land that it became necessary to translate their Scriptures from Hebrew into Greek.

This Greek translation, begun about 250 BC in Alexandria, Egypt, is called the Septuagint (Latin for “seventy,” hence the common abbreviation of this
by the Roman numerals LXX). According to a legend, seventy-two scholars (six chosen from each of the twelve Jewish tribes) translated it in seventy-two days. Today we know that the translation really took several decades to complete. Although we do not know how the seventy-two got shortened to seventy, this translation has been called the Septuagint since the first century.

Since the earliest Christians were Jews, they relied on the Jewish Scriptures for their basic understanding of who God was and why God entered human history. But from the time of Paul, in the middle of the first century, the Christian community became more and more Greek speaking. Because these Christians were ignorant of Hebrew or Aramaic, they relied on and adopted the Greek Septuagint as their Scriptures.

Soon the Christians began adding their own important sacred texts. Early Christian manuscripts were copied and circulated with amazing speed through the network of communities scattered throughout the whole Mediterranean world. The narrative gospel form, which was first used by Mark about AD 70, was well enough known to be imitated and revised by Matthew and Luke within a decade or so after Mark’s composition. Paul’s letters were collected and circulated, probably in a papyrus codex, so that by the end of the first century another New Testament author could refer to “all his letters” and associate them with “the other scriptures” (2 Peter 3:16).

Although Latin was the official language of government and law in the first-century Roman Empire, the common language for business and travel in the eastern Mediterranean was Greek. All of the New Testament books were originally written in the popular Koine (“common”) Greek dialect used throughout the first-century Roman world.

Whatever collections of Jesus’ original words might have been available in Aramaic were soon translated into Greek for evangelization purposes. The Christian community’s missionary progress in the Greek-speaking cities of the first-century Roman Empire transformed the Church from its rural Jewish roots into a new type of urban religious community. This community had its own doctrines, worship and moral codes, all of which were formulated and circulated in Koine Greek.

After the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine in AD 313, the Roman government for the first time recognized Christianity as a legal
religion. In 331, inspired by his newfound zeal for Christianity, Constantine
ordered and paid for fifty parchment copies of the Christian Scriptures for
the churches in his new capital city, Constantinople.

Fifty years later, Pope Damasus, who desired that some order be
brought to the variety of existing Latin translations, urged St. Jerome to
undertake the laborious task of translating the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures
into Latin. Jerome’s translation, called the Vulgate (Latin for “crowd,” identi-
fying it as a popular translation for everyone), was the most commonly used
translation for the more than one thousand years that Latin dominated the
intellectual life of Western Christianity. This Latin supremacy lasted until
the Renaissance rediscovery of many biblical manuscripts in ancient Greek
and Hebrew. Relying on these manuscripts instead of simply relying on the
Vulgata translation, Erasmus, Luther and other sixteenth century scholars
began to discover many differences between the Vulgate and these versions.

“I make no attempt to conceal it. Except for the Scriptures, the order of whose words is
a mystery, I never translate the Greek word for word. I express the meaning. On that I
can cite the example of Cicero when he translated. Horace, too, that shrewd and schol-
arly figure, gives the same advice to a translator in his Ars Poetica, ‘It is not word for
word that a translator interprets.’”

—ST. JEROME (d. 420)
Letter 57

Although Protestant scholars were beginning to employ the Greek and
Hebrew texts for their translations, the Catholic Church staunchly maintained
the Vulgate as its primary translation. In 1546, the Catholic ecumenical Council
of Trent decreed that “this ancient Vulgate version is to be regarded as the au-
thentic translation in public readings, disputations, sermons and expositions.”

Since then, however, dependence on the Vulgate has gradually dimin-
ished because scholars have increasingly had many more ancient manuscripts
at their disposal. They have also significantly increased their knowledge of an-
cient languages and their critical skills in examining ancient texts. So with the
blessing of the Church, modern Catholic translators of the Bible now consult
not only the Latin Vulgate but also a wide variety of other ancient sources in
Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac, Coptic, and Greek.
Over the centuries, as Christian missionaries penetrated farther into the realms of pagan Europe, translations of the Latin Vulgate into the vernacular languages multiplied. Tracing only the English translations here, we find that within a century of the conversion of England (ca. 600), there appeared paraphrases and translations in the Anglo-Saxon language done by such scholars as Caedmon and Bede. The first full translation of the Bible into English was done by John Wycliffe and others between 1382 and 1384. This Wycliffe Bible remained the most popular English version for the next two centuries until it was replaced by the *King James Version* (1611). If you wish to investigate further, many of these early Bible translations and several of those mentioned below are available online at www.BibleGateway.com. In chapter 8, we will examine in more detail the theories adopted for Biblical translation.

**English Translations: Protestant**

Beginning with the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, Bible translators began to rely less on the Vulgate and more on the newly rediscovered Greek and Hebrew manuscripts that were becoming more available through the new printing technology. Protestant translations included those by William Tyndale (1525–31), Miles Coverdale (1535); John Rogers’s *Great Bible* (1539–41); the *Geneva Bible* (1560), produced by exiled English Protestants during the Catholic reign of Mary Tudor, it was the first to translate the Old Testament from Hebrew manuscripts; and the *Bishops’ Bible* (1568), which was chosen as the basis for the *King James Version* (KJV).

“I had perceived by experience how it was impossible to establish the lay people in any truth, unless the scriptures were plainly laid before their eyes in their mother tongue, that they might see the process, order and meaning of the text.”

—**WILLIAM TYNDALE** (d. 1536)
early translator of the Bible into English

In 1611 the *King James Version* was published. Despite some initial criticisms about its scholarship and language, it was chosen as the official translation for reading in Anglican churches, hence its designation as the *Authorized Version*. Gradually it became the most popular, widely used and influential
Modern biblical scholarship begins from the basic truth that all meaning is determined by context. To discover the meaning of any text, we must pay attention to its contexts. Thus various methods and approaches have been devised to understand these contexts.

- We must recognize that we do not have the original manuscript of any biblical book, only copies of copies. Therefore we need to examine all relevant manuscripts to determine which are the best readings from all the variants available. To achieve these goals, we use **textual criticism**.

- We must recognize that the meaning of any text depends upon the author’s original intention (the literal sense). Communication (function) requires that we understand the author’s choice of literary genre (form) in order to convey the author’s intended meaning (content) in the circumstances in which the author wrote (the historical situation). To achieve these goals, we use **literary criticism** and the **historical-critical method**.

- We must recognize that many of the biblical books are complex, particularly in regard to the history of their composition and the transmission of their message from oral traditions into written documents. Therefore we need to identify and distinguish between the many sources used for a book’s composition and recognize the editorial layers in each book. To achieve these goals, we use **source criticism**.

- We must recognize the complexity of the gospels, especially their development from oral traditions into written documents. Therefore we need to distinguish between the many sources used for their composition and to understand the editorial work of each gospel writer. To achieve these goals, we use **redaction criticism**.

translation in the English language. In the 1870s British scholars began a revision of the *King James Version* according to the more sophisticated standards of modern critical textual scholarship and a more extensive knowledge of the ancient biblical languages. But their *Revised Version* (RV, 1881–85) and its American counterpart the *American Standard Version* (ASV, 1901) never gained enough popularity to dethrone the older *King James Version*. Further revisions like the *New American Standard Bible* (NASB, 1963, 1970) the *New King James Version* (NKJV, 1982) also tried to modernize its archaic language (*thee, thou, thine, begat*, and so forth).

Under the auspices of the National Council of Churches in America, a thorough revision of the *King James Version*, called the *Revised Standard
Version (RSV, 1952) appeared after World War II. Relying on the critical progress of modern scholarship, it balanced the desire to remain faithful to the tradition and yet to render the meaning in more modern English. The Revised Standard Version was itself redone in a more gender-sensitive translation called the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV, 1989).

Many other English translations are now available. Some were done under the auspices of various Christian Church organizations: the New English Bible (NEB, 1961–70) and its revision the Revised English Bible (REB, 1989) of the British Protestant churches; the conservative evangelical New International Version (NIV, 1973–78, 2011, thoroughly revised as Today’s New International Version, TNIV 2005) sponsored by the New York Bible Society (now Biblica); and Today’s English Version: The Good News Bible (GNT) from the American Bible Society. Others have been done by individual scholars, such as J. B. Phillips’s popular New Testament in Modern English (1962), Eugene Peterson’s The Message: the Bible in Contemporary English (1993, 2002) and The Bible: An American Translation (1931) by University of Chicago professors E. J. Goodspeed and J. M. Powis Smith (often called the Chicago Bible). Kenneth Taylor’s popular paraphrase The Living Bible (1971) was completely redone by a team of evangelical scholars as The New Living Translation (NLT, 1996).

**English Translations: Catholic**

Catholics also recognized the need for an approved vernacular translation. However, since the Council of Trent had declared the Vulgate to be the official translation, any Catholic translation was to be based on it rather than on the Greek or Hebrew. The first modern Catholic translation, done by English Catholic exiles, was the Douay-Rheims Version (1582–1609-10). The name comes from the two locations where its Old and New Testaments were published. Although somewhat literal and given to Latinisms because of its fidelity to the Vulgate, it influenced the Protestant translators of the King James Version. A century and a half later this version underwent a thorough revision at the hands of London bishop Richard Challoner to modernize its style. The Douay-Rheims-Challoner Version (1752) remained the standard Catholic translation for almost two hundred years.
The need for a translation adapted to the language of the twentieth century spurred the American Catholic bishops, working with the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, to sponsor the *Confraternity New Testament* (1941), a revision of the Rheims-Challoner New Testament, which would be suitable for both study and worship. A revision of the Old Testament was also begun, but it was abandoned when Pope Pius XII’s 1943 encyclical on Catholic biblical studies (*Divino Afflante Spiritu*) permitted biblical scholars to consult the original languages and not just the Latin for their translation.

After World War II, the American bishops commissioned a new and more contemporary translation of the Bible from its original languages called *The New American Bible* (NAB, 1970). Although its New Testament was not quite finished, it was put into service when Vatican Council II permitted the celebration of Mass in English. In preparation for the proposed revision of the English *Lectionary for Mass* (the collection of selected readings used at Mass and other celebrations), the New Testament was thoroughly revised in 1986 and the Psalms in 1991. In 2011 after 20 years of work, a *New American Bible Revised Edition* (NABRE, 2011) was completed by a group of nearly 100 scholars and theologians, including bishops, revisers and editors. The NABRE includes a newly revised translation of the entire Old Testament (including the Book of Psalms) along with the 1986 revised New Testament.

Another major English translation, the *Jerusalem Bible* (JB, 1966), was based on the modern French translation *La Bible de Jérusalem* (1956) by Dominican scholars from the École Biblique in Jerusalem. It contains extensive footnotes and acquaints the reader with textual variants in the ancient manuscripts. The English version was further revised and its translation significantly improved in the *New Jerusalem Bible* (NJB, 1985).

There are other Catholic translations by individuals as well as groups of scholars. In England, Oxford classics scholar Monsignor Ronald Knox translated the Vulgate (although he acknowledged the original languages in his footnotes) to create the *Knox Bible* (1944–50). In America, the New Testament (1950–54) by J. A. Kleist and J. L. Lilly rendered the Greek New Testament in fresh and vigorous modern American English. There have also been Catholic editions of many of the modern Bible translations that include all the books in the Catholic canon organized in their Catholic canonical order.
Which Books Belong in the Canon?

The procedures that were followed centuries ago to determine which books would be included in the biblical canon are now shrouded in the mists of history. Although we have no detailed historical documentation about the process, or clearly expressed reasons for these canonical decisions, we believe that the Holy Spirit was guiding the churches to recognize the writings that could be considered sacred.

We know that between AD 150 and 367 a general consensus was forming about the books that now comprise our Bible. But exactly what happened during those two centuries is mostly speculation. We lack the historical data to unravel precisely why these books were selected out of the many that we now know were available in those early Christian communities.

Certainly one factor in the establishing of a Christian canon was the separation of Christianity from its Judaic roots. After the Roman destruction of the Jerusalem temple in AD 70, Christians and Pharisaic Jews vied to establish their respective forms of Judaism as the best way to be Jews without a temple. As each group struggled to create its distinctive identity, the divisions between the groups widened and the controversies became more heated, as is evident from the anti-Jewish sentiments that appear so often in the gospels.

Christianity, which began as a group of Jews who recognized Jesus of Nazareth as the Jewish messiah, was now no longer considered Jewish. As a separate and distinctive religion, it adopted the Jewish books of the Greek Septuagint and added its own Christian writings to create the Christian Bible.

Probably the first books collected were the letters of Paul, which were written in the fifth decade of the first century. As was the custom in the ancient world, communities probably began copying these letters very soon after Paul wrote them. Although the individual letters were written in response to particular situations, their importance for the explanation of Christian doctrine and guidance for Christian living made them as useful then as they remain today.

The first collection of Paul’s letters was very likely an arrangement by length of seven books identified by the names of the seven churches to which the letters were written (Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians). We also see the
seven churches as representative of the whole Church in the seven messages of Christ to the churches in the book of Revelation (chapters 1–3).

The next collection was the four gospels, which were written in the last third of the first century. Three of these gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—are very similar in viewpoint and presentation. Since they can easily be lined up in columns and viewed “at one glance” (synoptic in Greek), they are often called the synoptic gospels. Biblical scholars have long recognized that these gospels depend on one another, but they disagree on exactly what the relationship is. John’s Gospel, although developed independently of the other three, probably owes its existence to some familiarity with the narrative form used in the three synoptic gospels.

“Almighty God, bestow on us the meaning of words, the light of understanding, the nobility of diction and the faith of the true nature. And grant us that what we believe, we may also speak.”

—ST. HILARY OF POITIERS (d. ca. 368)

The various other books and letters of the New Testament were also composed during the post-apostolic period from about AD 70 to 120. Although many of the New Testament books were quoted by Christian writers in the early second century, there is no indication that anything like an official canon existed at that time.

There is, however, evidence of a general consensus regarding the four gospels and the Pauline letters, with continuing dialogue on the inclusion of some of the other letters and the book of Revelation. Certain other Christian texts such as the Didache (The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles), the Shepherd of Hermas, 1 and 2 Letters of Clement, and the Letter of Barnabas were often grouped with the canonical books but were never officially included.

Closing the Canon
The canon began to be stabilized in the middle of the second century in large part because of those who were trying to make drastic changes to it. At the one extreme was the heretic Marcion, who tried to make the canon
too limited. In his zeal for a distinctive Christianity, Marcion rejected the Old Testament because of its inadequate doctrine of a wrathful God and its overemphasis on the Law. In its place, he emphasized the Christian God of love and the gospel message. From his examination of the New Testament, Marcion concluded that only Paul had really comprehended what Christianity was all about. But as the great church historian Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930) so perceptively noted, “In the second century only one Christian—Marcion—took the trouble to understand Paul; but he misunderstood him!”

Marcion set to work to salvage his version of the genuine Christian message. His Bible contained only Luke’s Gospel and ten letters of Paul (the nine to the seven churches and the personal letter to Philemon). But he purged even these books of their “Jewish errors.” He chopped out about 40 percent of Luke’s Gospel that he considered too Jewish, including the first two chapters that tell of the birth of Jesus. He also cut out many sections of Paul’s letters for the same reason. Accepting Marcion’s canon would have meant the Church’s complete repudiation of its Jewish roots—a step that neither the Roman nor the other Christian communities were willing to take.

On the other end of the spectrum, a group called the Gnostics sought to include in the canon a wide variety of other books. Gnosticism was a form of religion in late antiquity that valued insight or knowledge related to special divine revelations. It fostered a negative attitude toward the world and human society and offered deliverance from the burdens of earthly existence through special knowledge. It also promoted a dualistic approach that contrasted the evil material world with a good spiritual world.

Through early Christian writings that attacked these Gnostic attitudes and through the recent discovery of many ancient Gnostic manuscripts, we are more aware today of many of the non-canonical or apocryphal writings that were available in early Christianity that differed significantly from the theology and spirituality of our canonical books.

These apocryphal works include gospels, which were often attributed to various apostles (e.g., Peter, Thomas, Philip, James); acts of apostles (John, Peter, Paul, Andrew); letters (to the Laodiceans, 3 Corinthians) and apocalypses (Peter). Studying these works can contribute to our historical knowledge of the diversity found in early Christianity and also shed some
light on the formation and interpretation of our canonical books. But they remain primarily of scholarly interest and are not very useful guides for any authentic Christian spirituality for our lives today.

There seem to have been three traditional criteria that were adopted for distinguishing authentic Christian writings: apostolic origin, the importance of the audience to which the writing was addressed and its usefulness for worship and church life. Books acquired a higher degree of trustworthiness and authority when they could be directly (as with the writings of Matthew, John, Peter, Paul) or indirectly (as with writings of Mark or Luke) traced to the teachings of an apostle. When their apostolic origin was questioned, as with Johannine authorship of the book of Revelation in the Eastern churches (about AD 250) or Pauline authorship of the letter to the Hebrews in the Western churches, their claim to authority was diminished.

“By reading the scriptures and by meditating, Lord, I have read your words and meditated on your person for more years than I can remember. Over the years, the fire of desire to see you has grown hotter and hotter. As I have meditated, my soul has received greater light, and the scriptures excite my soul more than ever. Give me a single drop of heavenly rain to satisfy my spiritual thirst.”

—GUIGO THE CARTHUSIAN (d. ca. 1188)

Biblical books that were associated with major churches—for example, Mark (Rome), Luke and Matthew (Antioch), and John (Ephesus)—became widely distributed and consequently more influential. Others such as the letters of Philemon and Jude might have been more authoritative because of their recipients’ important status within a Christian community.

The major factor, however, in determining canonicity seems to have been the conformity of the content of these books with the general practice of the Christian life. These books were judged to be most appropriate for reading during worship and more suitable for prayer and spirituality because they expressed the most authentic Christian beliefs, teachings and moral guidelines.

Near the end of the fourth century, the general consensus about the biblical canon was gradually stabilizing. In his Easter letter of AD 367, St. Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria in Egypt, listed the twenty-seven books that compose our current New Testament, declaring that “in these alone is
the teaching of true religion proclaimed as good news: let no one add to these or take anything from them.”

That this canon became the standard is evident from both the Vulgate of Jerome (who was aware that the Latins did not accept the letter to the Hebrews and the Greeks did not recognize the book of Revelation) and the official list from the episcopal Council of Carthage (AD 397), which depended on a list from the Diocese of Hippo, where St. Augustine was bishop.

As I noted in the previous chapter, Protestants and Catholics at the time of the Reformation differed over which books belonged in the Old Testament. Following the stricter Jewish tradition, Protestants accepted as canonical only the Old Testament books written in Hebrew. Catholics, however, followed a wider Jewish tradition and so accepted as canonical the books found in the Greek Septuagint (including the seven deuterocanonical books). Despite these differences in their Old Testament, the Protestant churches made no changes in their New Testament canon.

Scholars are divided today about whether any newly discovered book could be accepted into the official biblical canon. Many conclude that even if its apostolic origin and the importance of its original audience could be demonstrated, the fact that it has not been used by the Church for two millennia would probably disqualify it from receiving canonical status. Thus our biblical canon will probably continue as it is now without any future changes.

Questions for Reflection and Group Discussion

1. Explain to a friend why there is no Greek manuscript that corresponds exactly to our modern translation of the New Testament.

2. How does the fact that the Bible is a collection of books make a difference to its reading and interpretation?

3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of reading a codex instead of a scroll? (To get a sense of how a scroll was read, take a roll of paper towels and pretend that the Gospel of Matthew is written on the inside.)

4. What are apocryphal gospels? Why would they not be included in our Bible?
An important result of serious Bible study is that we conquer our fear of “the Bible says” syndrome. So often we hear people claim “The Bible says…” as if simply stating what the Bible says were equivalent to explaining what the Bible means. Confusing says and means is the root of many difficulties in biblical interpretation.

The glib claim that “the Bible says” is similar to “the government says,” “the Church says” or “the Internet says.” What kind of authority would you give to someone who claimed that “the library says”? Wouldn’t you want to know exactly where in the library the information came from?

Like a library, the Bible is a collection of books that were written over a thousand-year period for audiences in many diverse historical and cultural situations. For this reason we must move our compass beyond what “the Bible says” to a more precise awareness of who wrote what passage, for whom, in what circumstances, to convey what message and for what reason. Without careful consideration of these issues, we cannot assume that what the words appear to say to us was what they meant to the original author who was inspired by God to write them.

The Catholic Church has wisely refrained from making any official doctrinal statement about the specific identity of any biblical author. In fact, we may never know for sure who most of the authors were. Identifying the author depends on historical scholarship rather than belief, and to question and investigate authorship using modern historical scholarship in no way conflicts with our religious beliefs about the revealed truth, inspiration and canonicity of the biblical text. Modern historical scholarship does not always agree with the traditional identifications of authors given by the early Church fathers, even though these might have been important for a book’s inclusion
in the canon. Accepting the canon that resulted from such judgments does not mean that we have to accept the ancient reasons for those judgments.

**Authors in the Ancient World**

In the ancient biblical world, perhaps only 10 percent of the population could read anything more than identifying the letters of the alphabet or perhaps their name, and an even smaller percentage could write. Their societies functioned primarily through spoken words. But since in an oral culture what was not remembered was lost forever, important words were set apart in poetized speech, memorized, performed in religious rituals and dramas and passed down for generations without ever being written down. When we think of writing a book today, we picture the author sitting at a typewriter or computer and producing the whole text. For the ancients, writing something down was very often the last step in a long process of oral composition, public performance and social transmission of stories, worship ceremonies, laws, proverbs and other materials that had long been used by the communities.

The Pentateuch as we have it, for example, was composed and edited over an eight-hundred-year period. Scholars think it existed orally for centuries before finally being written down and carefully edited from a variety of sources into its present canonical form. Since the mid-nineteenth century, scholars have been trying to identify and reconstruct these sources and editing.

The oral composition and transmission of community traditions both modified and solidified them with each retelling. When the text was finally written down, the writer expressed his own creativity in how he collected and shaped the many traditional materials at his disposal. Authors were striving not for “originality” and individual creativity but rather for accurate preservation of the traditions that guided the daily lives of their communities.

**Who Wrote the Biblical Books?**

Since most of the biblical books were rooted in oral traditions long before they were ever written down, we have practically no knowledge about any of their individual authors. We only learn about their identity and personality indirectly through careful reflection on their writings. Some books, such as those
by Old Testament prophets or the New Testament gospel and letter writers, show traces of the individual author’s interests and writing style.

Paul certainly is the best-known author of biblical books. Because his letters are personal and responded to specific problems in his ministry, they reveal much about Paul’s personality. And although Jesus wrote no books, the Christian community cherished and carefully remembered his words after his death. His words are a mirror of his personality. They tip us off about his concerns, his hopes, his vision and his values.

“In the Holy Scriptures you can make no progress unless you have a guide to show you the way.”

—ST. JEROME (d. 420)
Letter 53

The biblical authors—the ones who actually wrote down the books as we have them—are mostly anonymous. But since manuscripts cannot just appear without someone writing them, credit for authorship was often given or attributed to others, in particular those figures whose stature in the community could give authority to the manuscript and vouch for its truth.

Thus Moses is the attributed author of the Pentateuch (the Torah, or Law), even though we know that these books underwent extensive editing for centuries after his death. David is the attributed author of the book of Psalms, even though some of them were composed by other people and others written long after his death. Solomon is the attributed author of the Song of Songs and the book of Wisdom, even though the latter was composed in Greek some eight centuries after Solomon’s death!

The identity of many New Testament authors is also not as specific as we might suppose. Although we have names from Christian tradition for the gospel writers, for example, historical scholars today are not as quick to identify them simply with biblical persons who have the same names.

Since Mark and Luke are mentioned as coworkers of Paul and since Matthew and John are among the twelve apostles, they have traditionally been identified as the gospel writers in order to reinforce the authority of their writings. But their texts offer few personal clues about them. Unlike Paul whose letters reveal so much about him, the gospel writers hide behind their texts just
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FOR THE PROPER INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

HOW THIS GUIDES INTERPRETATION

The goal of Scripture study is the discovery of meaning (moving beyond simple facts to determine their significance), which demands attention to the form, function, and content of the text.

The first step recognizes the literary context. We must learn to read the texts according to the demands of its literary form or genre. Determining what kind of literary form has been chosen by the author is essential.

The second step recognizes the historical context. The author’s intended meaning (the literal sense) is known from the specific historical situation in which the text was composed.

The third step recognizes the social, cultural and rhetorical context. We must know about the cultural situation in which the texts originated and how they function as a response to the needs of the original audience.

The understanding of the theological content of Scripture requires attention to the whole context of Scripture—to the living tradition in which it has been received, understood and formulated, and to the connection that it has with other doctrinal formulations. Understanding the meaning of biblical truths requires that all these elements be examined. This interpretation is done under the guidance of the Church’s teaching office in order that the Church’s understanding of God through Scripture might develop to its fullness.

Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, #12

However, since God speaks in sacred Scripture through persons in human fashion, the interpreter of sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words.

Those who search out the intention of the sacred writers must, among other things, have regard for the “literary forms.” For truth is proposed and expressed in a variety of ways, depending on whether a text is history of one kind or another, or whether its form is that of prophecy, poetry or some other type of speech.

The interpreter must investigate what the sacred writer intended to express and actually expressed in particular circumstances as he used contemporary literary forms in accordance with the situation of his own time and culture.

For the correct understanding of what the sacred author wanted to assert, due attention must be paid to the customary and characteristic styles of perceiving, speaking and narrating which prevailed at the time of the sacred writer, and to the customs people normally followed at that period in their everyday dealings with one another.

But, since holy Scripture must be read and interpreted according to the same Spirit by whom it was written, no less serious attention must be given to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture, if the meaning of the sacred texts is to be correctly brought to light. The living tradition of the whole Church must be taken into account along with the harmony which exists between elements of the faith. It is the task of exegetes to work according to these rules toward a better understanding and explanation of the meaning of sacred Scripture, so that through preparatory study the judgment of the Church may mature. For all of what has been said about the way of interpreting Scripture is subject finally to the judgment of the Church, which carries out the divine commission and ministry of guarding and interpreting the word of God.
as modern novelists do. Their message of Jesus and his good news, not the author, is what they would want us to consider as most important.

**Why Were the Biblical Books Written?**

Since our Bible incorporates both the Jewish and the Christian sacred books, we know that its original audience was made up of two distinct religious communities. As these communities developed, their needs changed. The changing needs of a community always guide the production of books. Authors write to address issues and solve difficulties that confront their audiences. Knowing something about a community’s changing needs helps us understand why the authors wrote what they did.

“The Bible is obviously not a book, or a set of books, intended to be read for entertainment with an admixture of insight and information. Rather, it wants to ‘draw me out of myself,’ using the medium of narrative to transform my sense of the world, urgently alert me to spiritual realities and moral imperatives I might have misconceived, or not conceived at all.”

—ROBERT ALTER

*The World of Biblical Literature* (1992)

As we might expect, no author simply decided one day to write a book of the Bible. Authors respond to problems and needs of communities. Every community requires some expression of its basic beliefs, its moral guidelines and its worship practices. The Bible consists of the accumulated responses to these needs. All of the biblical books serve to form the faith community and maintain it. The various parts of the Old and New Testaments originated to help the community understand its identity and its relationship with God.

The Pentateuch is a narrative account of the people of Israel becoming God’s covenant partner. It recounts how the covenant was initiated by God through Abraham and established through Moses. It also specifies the mutual obligations of God and of the covenant community for maintaining this relationship—hence its designation as *Torah* or instruction.

The historical books describe the ups and downs of the Israelite community as it struggled to live as God’s covenant people. This endeavor began when Israel was but a loose confederation of tribes, and it continued through
the confederation’s development into a tightly controlled kingdom under the authority of a human king. The struggle took on yet another face when Israel was overthrown and colonized by other powerful empires. These national histories create a sense of identity for the community, encourage patriotic resistance when necessary and offer examples of behavior that distinguishes the community from the other peoples surrounding it.

The prophetic books originated when the guidance of the king led the people away from God. In a world that did not clearly separate like we do the issues of religion and politics, church and state, the prophets spoke out for God’s ways. When social and political crises confronted their nation, the prophets were lobbyists for following God’s agenda rather than the king’s.

“The prophet in Israel is not one who foretells but one who forthtells. He speaks not with foresight into the future but with insight into the ways in which people have broken the covenant. The prophet is one who is called not only to speak on behalf of Yahweh, but one who speaks on behalf of those who have no voice.”

—JOHN R. DONAHUE, S.J.

The wisdom literature maintained and sustained the community’s distinctive lifestyle. It offered psalms for the various community liturgies and proverbs for the instruction and guidance of everyday living. The wisdom teachers believed that mastery of everyday life was directly related to the mystery of God’s creation. Careful and sober reflection yields a life worth living.

The gospels are the community-forming documents for Christians. They provide the guidelines for the Christian way of following Jesus and the blueprints for building Jesus’ kingdom community here on earth. The gospel life of Jesus shows us the gospel life that every Christian is called upon to live.

The New Testament letters were written to clarify and address difficulties that arose for the early, developing faith communities. Missionaries such as Paul founded communities, stayed with them for a while and then moved on to found new communities. Lacking any long-term training in their Christian beliefs and practices, early Christians were forced to make choices for which they were ill prepared, which often created conflict within the communities. Rather than let these conflicts fester, leaders used letters to help Christians

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understand their distinctive beliefs so that they could know how to act. Sound Christian beliefs were the basis for authentic Christian behavior.

The book of Revelation, which we find strange and puzzling today, describes four revelatory visions that reveal Christ first at the center of the Church, then at the center of the cosmos, then in the history of God saving humanity from evil and finally in the eagerly anticipated divine transformation of our world into God’s desired kingdom of justice, love and peace. These visions encouraged the Christian community of that time to remain firm and endure the hostility of the Roman imperial government and of their hostile Roman or Jewish neighbors. They revealed that the God who changed history by freeing the Jewish people from the oppression of the Egyptian Empire could not be far away from the oppressed Christian community that, centuries later, needed to be snatched from the grasp of the Roman Empire.

“The not only one but perhaps two or more interpretations can be understood from the same words of Scripture. And so, even if the meaning of the writer is unknown, there is not danger, provided that it is possible to show from other passages of the Scriptures that any one of them in is accord with truth. A person who thoroughly examines the Holy Scriptures in an endeavor to find the purpose of the author (through whom the Holy Spirit brought the Holy Scripture into being), whether the goal is attained or whether from the words another meaning is elicited which is not opposed to the true faith, is free from blame if there is proof from some other passage of the Holy Scriptures. For, what could God have provided more generously and more abundantly in the Holy Scriptures than that the same words might be understood in several ways.”

—ST. AUGUSTINE (d. 430)
On Christian Instruction, #27

The Significance of Literary Forms
As readers, we learn to adjust our reading to whatever type of writing we encounter. Each type creates expectations that guide our reading. When we read our newspaper, for example, we continually shift our reading as we scan the general news, sports, comics, entertainment and financial pages. We would also apply different reading skills to read a biography of Abraham Lincoln, a history of Lincoln and the Civil War, or the poetry of Walt Whitman that expresses his feelings about Lincoln’s death.
Each literary form or genre requires different skills in order to read it. Attentive readers recognize different types of writing and adjust to these demands. They engage the appropriate reading skills in order to discover the meanings the authors have put into the text. By including many types of writing, the Bible demands that we recognize what each literary form requires and then shift gears to discern its meaning. Sorting out the different types of literature is generally not a difficult task.

“Once readers have determined the literary form of any biblical book or passage, standards applicable to that form help to clarify what the author meant, i.e., the literal sense. Many past difficulties about the Bible have stemmed from the failure to recognize the diversity of literary forms that it contains and from the tendency to misinterpret as scientific history pieces of the Bible that are not historical or are historical only in a more popular sense. If one correctly classifies a certain part of the Bible as fiction, one is not destroying the historicity of that section, for it never was history; one is simply recognizing the author’s intention in writing that section. Biblical fiction is just as inspired as biblical history.”

—REV. RAYMOND E. BROWN, S.S.

When examining a biblical book to identify its literary form, we must first determine whether it is poetry or prose. Our modern Bibles help us recognize these literary forms not only by providing information in the introductions but also by arranging the poetry into the characteristic ancient form of balanced couplets rather than in regular paragraphs. Although poetry and prose both aim to influence the audience, the function of specific types of writing varies. Some books are meant to entertain, others to educate or inform, and others to edify by providing encouragement or examples to follow.

As we noted before regarding primarily oral cultures, poetry or more accurately poetized speech was regularly used for important communications because it was memorable and different from everyday speech. Thus when we look for biblical poetry or poetized speech it will often be different from our modern idea of poetry. Thus biblical poetry not only characterizes the psalms, which are songs for worship and celebration, but also the prophetic oracles, especially those that report what God speaks (note that God practically always address the people in poetized speech indicating
its importance). Poetry also characterizes most of the proverbs and wisdom instructions, which needed to be memorized for practical living. Finally poetry usually characterizes the prayers of both individuals and groups.

Prose characterizes the narrative materials, which include the Pentateuch, the historical books, the gospels, and the Acts of the Apostles. The New Testament letters, which clarify doctrines and offer encouragement for Christian living, are also in prose form.

This variety of literary types and styles of expression in the biblical books reminds us that the Bible is more like a library rather than a single book. Moreover, as the community’s library, it contains the treasured memories and witness about how the community began, how it changed over time and how it lived out its call to be the people of God. Anyone entering into this community today needs to be aware of these family memories. Our choice of these particular books as those that orient our life in the Christian community makes them permanently relevant today as we struggle to live out our relationship with God and others.

Questions for Reflection and Group Discussion

1. Give an example of the difference between what someone says and what that person means.
2. How would our explanation of the divine inspiration of biblical texts be affected by our knowledge that some biblical texts were composed orally and used for decades or centuries before being written down?
3. What is the relationship between the identity of the author and the truth of the text?
4. Does the fact that many authors of biblical books are unknown bother you? Why or why not?
5. What difference does it make if we know that some biblical books are attributed to people who did not write them?
Reading the Scriptures makes it clear that the gospel is not merely about our personal relationship with God. Nor should our loving response to God be seen simply as an accumulation of small personal gestures to individuals in need, a kind of “charity à la carte,” or a series of acts aimed solely at easing our conscience. The gospel is about the kingdom of God and loving God who reigns in our world. To the extent that God reigns within us, the life of society will be a setting for universal fraternity, justice, peace and dignity.

—POPE FRANCIS
The Joy of the Gospel, #180
(November 24, 2013)
Whenever we go on a journey, the kind of trip and how long we will be gone determine what kind of luggage we will need. If it’s an overnight trip, we can just take a small bag. For a weekend, a small suitcase will do. And for a very long trip we might need several bags or a trunk.

Whenever we pack for a trip, we decide what is absolutely essential and what we would like to take if we have extra room or if we have a special need. Since we cannot pack everything for our Bible journey, we have to ask ourselves two questions: What are the essentials? and What are the extra things we can choose, depending on our special interests?

“For the searching and right understanding of the Scriptures there is need of a good life and a pure soul, and for Christian virtue to guide the mind to grasp the truth concerning God’s word.”

—ST. ATHANASIUS (d. 373)

There are two essentials: a good Bible translation and a Bible dictionary. The other helps I will mention are things you can acquire only if you are interested in other types of more careful and detailed biblical study. You can also now find many of these biblical resources available online or as programs for personal computers and apps for tablets or phones.

**The First Essential: A Good Bible Translation**

The first requirement for our journey is a good translation of the Bible. Bible translations come in a dizzying variety not only of bindings, sizes and costs but also of styles of translation. Some try to be very exact, while others paraphrase the authors’ thought rather than the exact words. Some digest certain
passages and eliminate others. Many Bibles provide helpful notes to aid the reader, while others have minimal notes or no notes at all.

Many of these biblical translations that I mention here can be viewed on the Internet at www.BibleGateway.com. Although this is not a specifically Catholic website, nevertheless it offers online versions of over 40 Bible translations in English (not to mention many translations in other languages) among which are several older and historically influential translations such as the King James Version (KJV), the Catholic Douay-Rheims Bible (the 1899 American edition, DRA), the 1599 Geneva Bible (GNV) and the Wycliffe Bible (1382). There are also modern translations such as the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV, including the Catholic Edition), the Common English Bible (CEB), the Good News Translation (GNT), the New International Version (NIV), the New Living Translation (NLT); and translations by individuals such as J.B. Phillips’s New Testament in Modern English, Eugene Peterson’s The Message, and Kenneth Taylor’s Living Bible paraphrase.

“Let us dispose our hearts therefore to listening, receiving and living out the word. The more we unite ourselves to Jesus through prayer, sacred Scripture, the eucharist, the sacraments celebrated and lived in the Church and in fraternity, the more there will grow in us the joy of cooperating with God in the service of the kingdom of mercy and truth, of justice and peace.”

—POPE FRANCIS
Message for World Vocation Day (May 11, 2014)

The two main Catholic Bible translations (the New American Bible and the New Jerusalem Bible) are not found on Bible Gateway but can be accessed at other websites. The New American Bible Revised Edition (NABRE) is available at the US Bishops website (www.nccbuscc.org/bible/), which also provides the daily scripture readings used at Mass that are in the older NAB version because the liturgy readings have not yet switched to the recent NABRE translation. The New Jerusalem Bible (NJB) is available at Catholic Online (www.catholic.org/bible) or at Veritas Bible (www.VeritasBible.com).

For those interested in working with the Hebrew or Greek languages, the New Testament is available online in Greek at www.greekbible.com/. This version also provides many point and click helps with Greek grammar and vocabulary. Another website (http://biblehub.com/interlinear/) offers an inter-

Bible Gateway also has an interesting study tool called *The Mounce Reverse-Interlinear New Testament*, which puts the English translation first and then coordinates the Greek words with it. Since the Greek is put into English letters rather than Greek ones, it makes it possible for non-Greek readers to have a sense of the Greek words. The drawback is that since it uses the English translation as its base, it does not reproduce the Greek word order and so gives a false look at the way the original Greek is composed.

“When the story of Jesus is truly our story, when we have caught his fire, when his good news shapes our lives individually, as families and as a church, his influence will be felt far beyond our church.”

—U.S. BISHOPS

“Go and Make Disciples” (November 1992)

As we will learn, Bibles are usually identified by the name of their translation and are commonly referred to with abbreviations. When you go to a bookstore to purchase a Bible or wish to invest in one for your computer, tablet or phone, you need to ask for the specific translation you want, because the same translation can be marketed by many different publishers.

First, a word of caution. The older standard Bibles like the Catholic *Douay-Rheims Version* and the Protestant *King James Version* have such archaic language that they are generally unsuitable for reading today. They have been surpassed by many more helpful modern translations. But they still retain important historical interest because of their influence both on the English language and on all subsequent English translations. Since the *King James Version* was the most widely used and probably the most commonly read book in the English language for the last four hundred years, its phrases resonate throughout English literature and many biblical allusions are still recognizable in their familiar King James form.

Despite several attempts to bring the *King James Version* up to date in the *American Standard Version* (1900-01), the *Revised Standard Version* (1952), the *New American Standard Bible* (1971), and the *New King James Version* (1982), all these revisions suffer from the same problems. Scholars today
have more and better ancient manuscripts than were available to the earlier translators. They also have a more sophisticated understanding of the ancient biblical languages. Moreover, the English language has changed—and is constantly changing—from its seventeenth century form. These changes need to be recognized and incorporated into any translation for a modern audience.

There are many modern Bible translations to choose from today. As you read the Bible more and more, you might wish to compare some of these translations to discover new riches. Since no translation from one language to another fully communicates all that the original does, every translation has positive and negative features. You can easily compare different translations online at www.BibleGateway.com. Just search for a verse in one translation, then when it pops up, click the “add parallel” button and select another translation to view. In this way you can also begin to see the different translation strategies at work.

“Lord, who can comprehend even one of your words? We lose more of it than we grasp, like those who drink from a living spring. For God’s word offers different facets according to the capacity of the listener, and the Lord has portrayed the message in many colors, so that whoever gazes on it can see in it what is suitable. Within it God has buried manifold treasures, so that each of us might grow rich in seeking them out.”

—ST. EPHRAEM (d. 373)
Commentary on the Diatessaron

The first two translations in the following list are the best Catholic translations now available. Catholic Bibles have normally included many helps in the form of footnotes for the reader. Traditionally, most Protestant Bibles omitted all notes except a few that informed readers about important manuscript variations that could lead to different possible translations of a particular verse. Now, however, almost all translations have an “annotated” edition that includes helpful notes and other resources for readers to use. When purchasing any translation, always look for the annotated edition.

The New American Bible (NAB, 1970, NABRE, 2011) is the finest Catholic translation available in American English. Done by members of the Catholic Biblical Association of America under the sponsorship of the U.S. bishops, it is the first American Catholic translation not based entirely
THE THREE STEPS IN TRANSLATING THE BIBLE

Translating the Bible is the result of many choices, both textual and linguistic (verbal and grammatical). Three general steps characterize the necessary process.

1. **Determine the text.** Since no original manuscripts of any biblical books exist, scholars examine and compare all the various manuscripts available to determine as accurately as possible what the text is that ought to be translated. There is no ancient manuscript that corresponds exactly to the Bible we now have.

2. **Determine the meaning in the original language.** Disagreements arise concerning the meaning of individual words in various literary, cultural and doctrinal contexts from the historical situation of the original author and audience.

3. **Determine the meaning in the receptor language.** Disagreements occur concerning which words best capture the shades of meaning found in the original text. How one attempts to bridge the gap between the two languages also depends on one’s theory of translation.

   - A **literal translation** follows as closely as possible the words and even the grammatical sentence structure of the original texts as long as they can be understood in the receptor language. It does not hesitate to retain a sense the historical distance and difference between the two languages in expressing meaning.

   - A **free translation** (paraphrase) focuses on the thoughts rather than the words of the original. It strives to smooth over or eliminate the historical distance and difference between the original and the receptor languages.

   - A **dynamic-equivalent translation** attempts to express the original meaning in appropriately modern grammatical forms and sentence structure without eliminating all the historical distance between the two languages.

on the Latin Vulgate. Instead, the translators used the original Hebrew and Greek texts, with a critical use of other ancient sources (including the Latin). The NAB is used for the Bible readings chosen to be read at Mass. It contains brief introductions to each book as well as cross-references to other biblical passages. The excellent footnotes provide immediate help for readers who can be puzzled by what they read. In the revisions some attempt has been made to use more gender-sensitive inclusive language for humans but not for God.

**The New Jerusalem Bible** (NJB, 1985) is another outstanding Catholic version. When the *Jerusalem Bible* was first translated into English in 1966, it relied primarily on the French translation *La Bible de Jérusalem* (1956). But
this new revision pays much more attention to the original biblical languages instead of the French. Besides having excellent introductions, its outstanding feature is its extensive notes that were also updated for the revision. Since the translation was done primarily by British scholars, sometimes the English is more British than American. You should be careful not to get the Reader’s Edition, which does not contain the notes.

You should also consider the following translations. Although they are not specifically Catholic, Catholic Scripture scholars have participated on the translation committees of many of these versions. If you decide to purchase one, make sure to ask for a version that includes the Catholic deuterocanonical books, or the Protestant Apocrypha, which are not always found in many Protestant Bibles. But most of these translations now have a Catholic edition that includes these deuterocanonical books. The following descriptions of various Bible translations are based in part on each version’s own introduction and explanatory notes. Any quoted material is from those introductions.

“We do not look upon the Bible as an authority for science or history. We see truth in the Bible as not to be reduced solely to literal truth, but also to include salvation truths expressed in varied literary forms.”

—U.S. BISHOPS
“A Pastoral Statement for Catholics on Biblical Fundamentalism” (1987)

The Revised Standard Version (RSV, 1952), although it began as a revision of the King James Version, it is still a helpful translation because of its accuracy. It strives to preserve the Greek and Hebrew sentence structure and word order when possible. One scholar claimed that if every Greek manuscript of the New Testament were somehow destroyed, we could re-create the Greek text from the RSV. The accuracy of this translation can be a fine complement or counterbalance to translations that are not so literal.

The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV, 1989) is a thorough revision of the RSV that introduces changes “warranted on the basis of accuracy, clarity, euphony and current English usage.” This translation is distinctive for the care it has taken to eliminate masculine-oriented language relating to people (not God) insofar as could be done without distorting passages that reflect the historical situation of ancient patriarchal culture and society. Its guiding
maxim is to achieve a translation that is “as literal as possible, as free as necessary.” This translation is used for study and worship by Catholic churches in Canada and by many mainline Protestant churches. The RSV and NRSV translations are also used in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994, 1997).

“The proclamation of the gospel is not an ensemble of dogmas and regulations, but rather God’s message, addressed, in Christ, to us.”

—CARDINAL JOSEPH RATZINGER

to the synod of European Bishops (December 2, 1991)

**The New International Version** (NIV, 1978) is a multipurpose translation by evangelical scholars from several English-speaking nations. They wanted a translation that would be accurate without being literal, and suitable for “public and private reading, teaching, preaching, memorizing and liturgical use.” They achieved a continuity with the older, more familiar style of biblical language in a form that was more readable because they eliminated archaic words, modified sentence structure and were generally sensitive to the contextual meaning and connotations of words. A complete revision was produced as **Today's New International Version** (TNIV, 2005).

**The Good News Bible** (GNT, 1976, 1992) is an attempt to put the Bible into more ordinary and familiar language instead of the more formal biblical language we usually hear. The translators wanted to reproduce for the modern reader the meanings of the original texts without resorting to traditional biblical vocabulary or style. Their work did much to promote the method of translation that strives for dynamic equivalence, that is, a thought-for-thought translation instead of the word-for-word style of translation that had been used for the traditional English translations.

**The Revised English Bible** (REB) began as a project of the Church of Scotland in 1946 but soon developed into a joint effort with most of the non-Catholic churches of Great Britain. Their translation was published as the *New English Bible* (NEB, 1970). A thorough revision appeared as the *Revised English Bible* (REB, 1989). Like other translations that were moving away from the idea that translations should reproduce the word order and sentence structure of the original, the NEB adopted the dynamic-equivalence method. Their goal was “understanding the original as precisely as we could (using all
available aids), and then saying again in our own native idiom what we believed the author to be saying in his.” They achieved a fresh literary style (more British than American) that is also very suitable for oral reading in worship.

**The New Living Translation** (NLT, 1996, 2nd ed. 2005, 2007) attempts to resolve a difficult issue for *The Living Bible* by Kenneth Taylor. One of the most popular English Bible versions with over forty million copies sold, it is not a real translation but a paraphrase. As Taylor admits in his preface, it is his own “restatement of the author’s thoughts, using different words than he did.” The positive value of paraphrasing is that it can help readers understand the meaning of difficult passages. The danger, as Taylor himself also notes, is that “whenever the author’s exact words are not translated from the original languages, there is a possibility that the translator, however honest, may be giving the English reader something that the original writer did not mean to say.”

The success of *The Living Bible* prompted a group of ninety evangelical scholars to remedy the dangers associated with its paraphrasing. They carefully compared *The Living Bible* to the original Greek and Hebrew texts and created the general-purpose translation called *The New Living Translation*, which attempts to combine easy readability with accuracy for study.

**The NET Bible** (New English Translation, 2005) is a free, “completely new” online English translation of the Bible, “with 60,932 translators’ notes” sponsored by the Biblical Studies Foundation and published by Biblical Studies Press at NetBible.com. More than 25 biblical scholars—experts in the original biblical languages—worked directly from the best currently available Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts (also viewable). The translators’ notes make the original languages far more accessible, allowing you to look over the translator’s shoulder at the very process of translation.

**The Common English Bible** (CEB, 2010) is another fresh and very readable translation that includes a version with the deuterocanonical books for Catholics. Produced by 120 biblical scholars from 22 faith traditions (including Roman Catholic), the language is intended to be at “a comfortable level for over half of all English readers,” hence the name *Common English Bible*. The translators attempted to balance accuracy regarding the ancient texts with clarity for modern readers. They often include helpful footnotes explaining their translation decisions.
How to Examine a Translation

When comparing various translations, the most important information is usually found in the introduction, which often provides clues about why the translators thought there should be one more translation even though dozens are now available. Most important, it generally sheds light on the principles that guided their work as translators. A Bible’s introduction and table of contents should usually answer several of these basic questions.

**Which books does it include?** Does it include the deuterocanonical books that the Catholic Church accepts in its canon? Whether it has these books can be an important consideration because without them, you will be unable to find some biblical books and readings that Catholics refer to and also use at Mass. If a Catholic version is available, it will probably incorporate the deuterocanonical books into their usual places in the Catholic arrangement of books. If they are included only in a special section at the end of the Bible called the Apocrypha, you will need to read the introduction to that section to discover how to find the books you are looking for. Note that among the Apocrypha are some books that are not canonical for Catholics.

“**I wish to ask one favor of you all that each of you take in hand that section of the gospels which is to be read among you on the first day of the week, or on the Sabbath, and before the day arrives that you sit down at home and read it through, and carefully consider its contents, and examine all its parts well—what is clear, what is obscure, what seems to be contradictory but is not really. And when you have tried, in a word, every point, then go to hear it read.**”

—ST. JOHN CHRYSTOSOM (d. 407)
*Homily on John 11.1*

**Which manuscripts does it depend on?** Does it rely on the best available Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek manuscripts, or does some particular translation (whether ancient or modern) govern its work? Some Bibles are revisions of previous translations, such as the *King James Version*, and merely seek to modernize the language. Others, such as the *Jerusalem Bible*, which was based on a French Bible translation, are actually translations of translations rather than of the original ancient texts.
Which theory of translation does it use? Translating the Bible has become more and more sophisticated over the centuries. Although every translation attempts to convey the meaning of the ancient Hebrew and Greek texts as accurately as possible to the modern reader, there are generally two schools of thought about how to do it.

The more literal approach seeks a “formal equivalence” between the words of the original language and the corresponding words of the modern language. This word-for-word emphasis seeks to keep as much as possible the word order and sentence structure of the ancient languages which are not always the same as in English. Its overriding concern is accuracy and fidelity to the author’s words.

The other approach seeks a “dynamic equivalence” between the message of the original language and its counterpart in the modern language. This thought-for-thought emphasis also seeks to create as much as possible the same impact on modern readers that the original had on its audience. Its overriding concern is idiomatic power and fidelity to the author’s thoughts.

How can I compare different translations? The easiest way to compare translations is online (see www.BibleGateway.com), which is simpler and less costly than buying and using a printed parallel Bible. Although parallel Bibles in print include selected Bible versions side by side on each page, unfortunately, due to space considerations, they do not always have the specific versions you might want to compare. Moreover, the print versions usually become too bulky for handy reference and so eliminate the helpful notes. The following are some printed parallel Bibles that you might want to investigate.

The Complete Parallel Bible from Oxford University Press includes four translations—the New American Bible (NAB), the New Jerusalem Bible (NJB), the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), and the Revised English Bible (REB)—arranged in columns so that the corresponding verses appear on each page. As you might expect, this is a very fat book (3291 pages and 4.3 pounds!), and it is not easy to hold in your hands to read. But it does give you immediate access to the complete text of four important modern versions.

The Layman’s Parallel Bible from Zondervan features the KJV, the NIV, the NRSV, and The Living Bible. This allows the reader to inspect the various
A SPECTRUM OF BIBLE TRANSLATIONS

One way to get a sense of the different versions that result from the two basic methods that guide translations is simply to list the different types that exemplify the spectrum of translation styles.

**Very accurate but not very readable**
- King James Version (KJV)
- New King James Version (NKJV)
- New American Standard Bible (NASB)

**Accurate and readable**
* (formal equivalent—word-for-word emphasis)*
- Revised Standard Version (RSV)
- New American Bible (NAB, NABRE)
- New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

**Accurate and readable**
* (dynamic equivalent—thought-for-thought emphasis)
- New Jerusalem Bible (NJB)
- New International Version (NIV)
- The Good News Translation (GNT)
- Revised English Bible (REB)
- The NET Bible (NET)
- The Common English Bible (CEB)
- The Kingdom New Testament

**Very readable, but not very literal**
- The Message
- New Living Translation (NLT)

**Paraphrase**
- The Living Bible

styles of translation, from the word-for-word KJV and its most recent revision, the NRSV, to the thought-for-thought NIV and the paraphrased Living Bible.

The Precise Parallel New Testament, also from Oxford, includes eight translations—the United Bible Societies’ Greek text (fourth edition), the KJV, the Rheims New Testament, the Amplified Bible, the NIV, the NRSV, the NAB, and the NASB. These translations allow you to consider the original Greek, the great historic English texts and several modern translations that exemplify the different methods of translation that distinguish Bibles today.
Which Translation Is Best?

Probably the most commonly asked question of Bible reader is, Which Bible translation is best? But best for what? The answer hinges on why you want to use the Bible. Bibles can be read for a variety of reasons—for personal reading, for study, for private prayer or for public reading during community worship. Your reasons for reading the Bible can help you to determine which translation you might find most suitable.

“Put aside a little time in the evening especially for praying, for meditating, for reading a page of the gospel or an episode in the life of some saint. Create a zone of desert and silence for yourself in that way.”

—POPE JOHN PAUL II

*Solitude and Silence Nourish the Spiritual Life* (1998)

Remember that since languages never correspond directly with one another, every translation is to some extent an interpretation of the Bible’s meaning. Readers should compare one or more translations to recognize the different ways that scholars have attempted to express the original meaning of the Bible in a modern way. You might find it helpful to compare one or two Bibles to determine which one you prefer.

**For personal reading use a translation that is readable and accessible.**

Beginning to read the Bible can be a challenge. Often for our personal reading we want to experience the biblical text in a way that grabs us or speaks to us in language that is familiar to us. Using a translation that tries to make the reading easier is often a good way to start. Bibles that are guided by the philosophy of dynamic equivalence (thought-for-thought translation) are in general more suitable for personal reading.

By using such popular translations as the new *Common English Bible*, the *New Jerusalem Bible, Today’s New International Version*, the *Good News Bible: Today’s English Version*, the *New Living Translation* or the *Revised English Bible*, you will gain an introduction to the story and the message of the Bible in language that strives to make the text reader friendly.

There are two other modern translations that you might consider that try to give the reader a feel for the everyday style of the language in which the original biblical texts were written. The first is *The Kingdom New Testament:*

The second translation is The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language (NavPress 1993, 2002) by Eugene Peterson, which is now available in a Catholic version (ACTA Publications, 2013) that includes the deuterocanonical books and arranges all the books in the Catholic order. Peterson’s language is earthy and forceful. He helps us sense the impact that the text might have made on its first century listeners. But the danger in converting “the tone, the rhythm, the events, the ideas, into the way we actually think and speak” is that we no longer get the words that the original writers wrote. Reading Peterson is a treat, but it is best done in conjunction with a translation that strives for more verbal accuracy.

For Bible study use a translation that is reliable and accurate. The best Bible for study is one that gives verbal accuracy in translation and provides scholarly notes to help with difficult passages. The New American Bible and the New Revised Standard Version, which put more emphasis on the formal-equivalence theory of translation, are most helpful for careful study because they focus on the author’s own words. They also allow the reader to get a flavor of the grammatical syntax and sentence structure of the original. Since they strive to represent as accurately as possible what the author said, they can convey the obscurity and the sometimes awkward or complicated expression of the original author. Where the original text is unclear, as in several sections of Paul’s letters, this can be illustrated and not simply glossed over by presenting what someone thinks the author was trying to say.

Study Bibles
To respond to the growing interest in Bible study, many publishers have created special editions of the Bible that include many of the helps that beginners need. If you are going to purchase a new Bible, you might consider one
of these study Bibles as a way to get both a modern translation and some convenient study helps. Most study Bibles include maps, extensive notes and application helps, historical and literary backgrounds on the books, and a glossary or brief dictionary of important terms.

“How different our world would be if everyone could accept the good news of Jesus and share the vision of faith!”

—US. BISHOPS

“How and Make Disciples” (November 1992)

A very good investment for the serious Bible reader would be one of these two excellent study Bibles: the Oxford Catholic Study Bible (rev. ed. 2011) or the Little Rock Catholic Study Bible (Liturical Press, 2011). Both include the New American Bible Revised Edition (NABRE) as well as background articles and helpful reading guides for every book of the Bible. Although it costs a bit more, you should consider purchasing the hardbound edition, which will last longer despite abundant use. Another option might be the HarperCollins Study Bible (rev. ed 2006) which includes the NRSV translation and excellent notes done by an ecumenical group of biblical scholars including several Catholics. There are numerous other study Bibles that use other translations.

**The Second Essential: A Bible Dictionary**

Just as a tour guide tells you about the background and history of the places you visit, so a Bible dictionary or encyclopedia supplies material about the people, places, things and themes that you encounter in your reading. The best single-volume ones to examine are the Oxford Dictionary of the Bible (2nd ed. 2011), HarperCollins Bible Dictionary (rev. ed. 2011), The Mercer Dictionary of the Bible (2001), Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible (2000), Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary (2011), and Fr. John L. McKenzie’s older but still useful Dictionary of the Bible (1965, 1995), which is distinctive in that it often relates the biblical information to Catholic theology and doctrine.

The most extensive and finest Bible dictionary of all is the six-volume Anchor Bible Dictionary (1992), a compendium of biblical scholarship by nearly 1000 scholars from all over the world. It is also obtainable on CD for your home computer or online at your local library through Logos Research.
Systems. A great advantage of the CD version is that it allows you to quickly search through the whole dictionary (which is practically impossible in the print version) for cross-references to words, topics and themes.

**Optional Helps**

There are numerous other helps that can make your Bible reading journey more rewarding. These resources are the foundation for your home Bible reference library. Although these are not essential, they supply the background that can make your reading journey richer and more enjoyable. Before purchasing any, you might want to take time to browse through your local bookstore or public library, or better yet in a seminary or academic (college or university) library or a Catholic bookstore, to examine them for yourself.

**Commentaries**

For working your way through the individual books of Scripture, your best help is a commentary. Commentaries, which discuss the meanings of the biblical text, come in various degrees of difficulty.

“Give some time, if it is only half an hour in every day, to devotional reading, which is necessary to the well ordering of the mind.”

——ST. ELIZABETH SETON (d. 1821)

**Beginning commentaries** take you through larger units of the text so that you get the general flavor of the biblical book. They provide enough detail to enhance your reading but not so much that you bog down. A very good Catholic commentary on this level is the older *Collegeville Bible Commentary* (1992) or the revised version called the *New Collegeville Bible Commentary* (2005). Covering every book of the Bible, these come individually in a handy pamphlet size and include the NAB text on the top part of the page and the running commentary below. Study questions are also included. The complete commentary, without the Bible text, is also published in separate Old and New Testament volumes or in a convenient single-volume edition. You might also look at N.T. Wright’s *The New Testament for Everyone* (18 volumes, Westminster /John Knox Press, 2004-2011) that skillfully weaves together the meaning of the scripture passage and its application.
to our everyday lives. He reminds us that the ultimate challenge of reading scripture is not just to understand it (the “what” question) but to apply it to our everyday lives as Christians (the “so what” question).

**Intermediate-level commentaries** add more detailed information and cover the biblical text by section or even verse by verse. These commentaries are readable and yet challenging because they start to reveal the depths of meaning that the biblical texts can conceal. Examples of this type include the excellent multi-volume *Sacra Pagina* series (Liturgical Press), the *Interpretation Bible Study* commentaries for teaching and preaching (Westminster/John Knox Press), or the several *Abingdon New Testament Commentaries* (Abingdon Press).

“A commentary attempts to interpret another man’s words, to put into plain language what he expressed obscurely. Consequently, it gives the opinions of many people, and says: Some interpret the passage in this sense, some in that; these try to support their opinion and understanding of it by this evidence or reasoning; so that the wise reader, after reading these different explanations, and having familiarized himself with many that he can either approve or disapprove, may judge which is the best, and, like a good banker, may reject the money from a spurious mint.”

—ST. JEROME (d.420)

_Apologia_ I.16

**Advanced commentaries** are the type that scholars use. They deal with the biblical books in great detail and often contain far more information than we ever imagined. However, you can often read these with great profit when you wish to explore specific chapters or verses or particularly puzzling passages in greater depth. Perhaps the best place to locate these is in a seminary or university library.

There are also one-volume Bible commentaries that contain explanations for each biblical book. Examples include *Harper’s Bible Commentary*, *The International Bible Commentary*, *The Interpreter’s One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, *The NIV Bible Companion*, and *The Women’s Bible Commentary*.

The finest Catholic one-volume Bible commentary is still *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (1990), edited by Fr. Raymond Brown, Fr. Joseph Fitzmyer, and Fr. Roland Murphy. Besides thorough introductions and detailed commentary for each biblical book, this volume contains more
than twenty topical articles covering much basic material that any reader would find helpful about the Bible. If there were only one book to put in your home reference library, this would be it. An abbreviated and somewhat simplified version of this, called The New Jerome Bible Handbook (1992), is published by the Liturgical Press. This digest contains only very brief introductory material and no detailed comment on the biblical books.

**Atlases of the Bible**

An atlas of biblical lands, with historical and geographical maps, is helpful for situating the Bible in its physical and geographical environment and being able to picture the places where Jesus walked and worked. There are many possibilities to choose from and many of the older Bible atlases like *The Macmillan Bible Atlas* (1977, rev. ed. 1993) and *The Harper Atlas of the Bible* (1987, now available in a concise edition, 2008) can be helpful and instructive. Others to consider might be: *The Zondervan Atlas of the Bible* (2010), the *Oxford Bible Atlas* (2009), and National Geographic’s lavish *The Biblical World: An Illustrated Atlas* (2007). Many Bible computer programs also include maps and you can find many helpful maps online.

“The striking agreement of the texts with the places, the marvelous harmony of the gospel ideal with the country which served it as a framework, were like a revelation to me. I had before my eyes a fifth gospel, torn, but still legible.”

—ERNST RENAN (d. 1892)

*Life of Jesus*

**Synopses of the Four Gospels**

As you begin to study the gospels more carefully, you might wish to explore a synopsis, which places the gospel texts side by side in order to detect more easily the differences between the individual gospels and thus identify the editorial changes that Matthew and Luke made to Mark’s gospel. This allows you to study the unique contributions of each gospel writer, as scholars do in what they call redaction (editing) criticism.

The older standard text was Burton Throckmorton’s *Gospel Parallels*, a synopsis of the first three Gospels. Its older edition (1973) used the RSV trans-
lation, and a revised edition (1992) used the newer NRSV text. A Synopsis of the Four Gospels (1985), edited by Kurt Aland, is available from the American Bible Society. There is also a Common English Bible Gospel Parallels (2012) using that recent translation (CEB). But instead of buying one of these or other printed editions, it is much easier to compare the four canonical gospels (also with the possibility of including the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas) online at The Five Gospel Parallels website from the University of Toronto (www.utoronto.ca/religion/synopsis/) which uses the RSV text.

**Bible Concordances**

Another handy tool is a concordance, an alphabetical list of the principal words in the Bible along with citations of their locations and a brief portion of the sentence in which each is used. This makes tracing themes or finding passages more convenient. But since different Bibles might translate the same original word differently in English, a concordance must be correlated to the specific translation you are using. Although concordances still come in printed volumes, having a Bible translation on your computer or using one online gives you a much faster and better concordance because most programs allow you to search the text not only for single words but also for particular phrases or combinations of words.

**Questions for Reflection and Group Discussion**

1. Which Bible translation do you now have? If other friends or members of your discussion group have different translations, compare some verses to see how the translations differ.
2. How would you explain the difference between a dynamic-equivalent and a formal-equivalent translation? If members of the group have different translations, determine which category each belongs to.
3. What is a concordance? Why does it have to be correlated to a particular translation?
4. Explain the difference between a commentary on John’s Gospel and a book about it.
PART THREE

Making Your Journey
Continue your search for truth. Recall the words of one of your great friends, St. Augustine: “Let us seek with the desire to find, and find with the desire to seek still more.” Happy are those who, while possessing the truth, search more earnestly for it in order to renew it, deepen it and transmit it to others. Happy also are those who, not having found it, are working toward it with a sincere heart. May they seek the light of tomorrow with the light of today until they reach the fullness of light.

But do not forget that if thinking is something great, it is first a duty. Woe to whoever voluntarily closes their eyes to the light. Thinking is also a responsibility, so woe to those who darken the spirit by the thousand tricks which degrade it, make it proud, deceive and deform it. What other basic principle is there for thinkers except to think rightly?

—VATICAN II BISHOPS
Closing message to scientists and thinkers (December 8, 1965)
Whenever visiting a city for the first time, it is good to start with one of those daylong tours that briefly hits all the important tourist sights. Your initial reading journey is like one of these scenic tours. It provides a general acquaintance with the famous places that no tourist would want to miss. At the same time, it whets your appetite for further excursions to these places to explore them in greater detail.

As you take up your Bible to read, where should you begin, and how should you work your way through it? You could follow the trite wisdom of the King of Hearts in Alice in Wonderland, who advises that you should “begin at the beginning and go on till you come to the end: then stop.” However, since the Bible is not a book but a library of very different books, you might not derive much pleasure or profit simply by beginning with the first book and reading straight through until you have read them all.

“Learn the heart of God in the words of God, that you may sigh more eagerly for things eternal, that your soul may be kindled with greater longings for heavenly joys.”
—Pope St. Gregory I (The Great) (d. 604)

But if you do wish to read it straight through, your best companion is a good study Bible such as the Oxford Catholic Study Bible (2nd ed., 2011) or the Little Rock Catholic Study Bible (Liturgical Press, 2011). Besides having the whole New American Bible Revised Edition (NABRE), they also provide reading guides, notes and commentary that lead you through the text. For each biblical book, first read the introduction and then use the study helps and notes to understand the book’s meaning. You might also wish to have a Bible dictionary or a one-volume commentary to consult for further help.
A different approach might be to begin with what most interests you. For Christians, a good starting point is the Gospel of Luke and its companion volume, the Acts of the Apostles. They offer a basic introduction to Jesus’ life and ministry as well as the life and ministry of the early Christian community. This gives you a framework in which to understand the other New Testament books and to appreciate their contributions to the creation of a distinctively Christian way of life. But eventually, it will be necessary to immerse yourself in the Old Testament, which provides the necessary background for understanding Jesus, his world and his message of good news.

**A Practical Travel Plan for Your Reading Journey**

Instead of reading the Bible straight through or simply reading eclectically, a more practical and profitable approach is to read the biblical story in a way that re-creates the experience of the biblical community. This way you can follow the growth and development of the Jewish and Christian communities as they try to figure out how to live out their relationship with God. This approach also reinforces your awareness of the historical chronology and of the changing circumstances in which the biblical books were written.

“It is the duty of good education to arrive at wisdom by means of a definite order.”

—ST. AUGUSTINE (d. 430)

_Soliloquies, 1:13:23_

The plan of suggested readings that follows here is one that I helped develop for the four-year adult Bible study course of the original Denver Catholic Biblical School Program, published by Paulist Press (rev. ed. 2010). Following this travel plan also ensures that you will read every book of the Bible on your initial journey. The four _Student Workbooks_ for this Bible study program also contain further questions suitable for either individual study or small group discussion for each biblical book. Although this program was designed to work under the guidance of a trained teacher meeting once a week over four years, you might find that these questions help you and your fellow travelers get more out of your reading journey.
IMPORTANT DATES IN BIBLICAL HISTORY

Old Testament Era

c. 1800 bc Call of Abraham and beginning of covenant relationship with Yahweh

c. 1250 Exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt, with Moses as their leader

c. 1200 Conquest of Canaan and confederation of the twelve tribes

c. 1000 David becomes king; Jerusalem chosen as capital

c. 970–931 Solomon is king; first temple built in Jerusalem

c. 930 Solomon’s kingdom divided into Israel (north) and Judah (south)

c. 850 Ministry of the prophet Elijah

c. 740 Call of First Isaiah; Assyrian expansion and domination

721 Assyria conquers Samaria; end of the northern kingdom (Israel)

701 Assyrian king Sennacherib invades Judah, but Jerusalem is spared

621 King Josiah’s reform (also called the deuteronomic reform)

612 Babylonian destruction of Assyrian capital Nineveh

598 First Babylonian capture of Jerusalem; exile of royalty and elites

587 Babylonian destruction of first Jerusalem temple; exile of many Judeans

538 Decree of Cyrus the Great of Persia ends the Judeans exile in Babylon

520 Preaching of prophets Haggai and Zechariah to rebuild Jerusalem temple

515 Dedication of the Jerusalem second temple, which was rebuilt after the exile

c. 450–400 Restoration by Ezra (a priest) and Nehemiah (the Persian governor)

c. 400 Pentateuch completed in its present written form

333–23 Reign of Alexander the Great; Hellenistic rule over Mediterranean world

167–164 Maccabean revolt against Greek Seleucid king Antiochus IV

164 Desecrated second temple in Jerusalem is rededicated (Feast of Hanukkah)

63 Romans achieve domination over the Mediterranean world

37 Herod the Great becomes king of Judea for the Romans

c. 4 Jesus of Nazareth is born

New Testament Era

26–36 AD Pontius Pilate is the Roman procurator in Judea

27 Beginning of the public ministry of Jesus

30 or 33 Crucifixion of Jesus in Jerusalem at the Passover festival

c. 36 Saul (Paul) of Tarsus converted to the Christian “Way”

46–49 Paul’s first missionary journey for the Antioch Christian community

c. 49 Apostolic meeting in Jerusalem opens the Christian community to Gentiles

49–52 Paul’s second missionary journey (his letters begin ca. 50)

54–57 Paul’s third missionary journey

58–63 Paul arrested; goes to Rome for trial

64 Emperor Nero burns Rome; Christians are blamed and persecuted

c. 67 Martyrdom of Peter and Paul under Nero; the Apostolic Age ends

70 Roman destruction of second Jerusalem temple (which has never been rebuilt)

73 Final defeat of Jewish rebels against Rome at the desert fortress of Masada

c. 85 Pharisaic control of Judaism begins the exclusion of Christians

132–135 Romans end messianic revolt of Bar Kochba; Christianity now definitively parts ways with Judaism to become an independent religion
Old Testament Foundations: From Exodus to Exile

A good place to begin your Bible reading is with the narrative story of the covenant-making experience of the Hebrew people when they were delivered from oppression in Egypt (the books of Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus and Deuteronomy). This is the most important experience in the Old Testament, and it serves as the pattern or guideline for the Hebrew’s understanding their covenant relationship with their God Yahweh. In this exodus experience, they learned for the first time who God was, what God wanted by breaking into their lives and who they were in relation to God. This exodus experience becomes the key for unlocking the meaning of God’s search for covenant partnership with the human community. From this pivotal experience, the Israelites could look backward to their ancestral stories (Genesis 12–50) and to their relationship to all humanity (Genesis 1–11), and forward to the historical development of the community (the historical and prophetic books).

The Exodus

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exodus 1–6</th>
<th>The call of Moses</th>
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<tr>
<td>Exodus 7–13</td>
<td>Plagues and Passover</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exodus 14–15</td>
<td>The exodus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exodus 16–18</td>
<td>The desert</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exodus 19–24</td>
<td>The Sinai covenant and Moses’ <em>Torah</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Exodus 25–31</td>
<td>The ark of the covenant</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exodus 24:12–18; 32–34</td>
<td>The golden calf</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leviticus 12–14, 16, 19, 23, 26</td>
<td>The covenant laws</td>
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<tr>
<td>Numbers 6, 9–14, 16, 17, 20–24</td>
<td>Forty years wandering to the promised land</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deuteronomy 1, 4–11</td>
<td>A new focus on the covenant</td>
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<tr>
<td>Deuteronomy 29–34</td>
<td>Moses’ last sermon and death</td>
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The exodus story is found in the part of the Old Testament that the Jews call the Law, or *Torah* (instruction). But these books are not written like our law books but rather as a narrative story of the people’s special covenant relationship with God. They describe the origins, development, obligations of each covenant partner and the challenges that the Israelite community faced in their relationship with God. Everything else in the Old Testament is, in one way or other, a working out of this essential covenant experience.
The narrative begins with the book of Exodus, in which God calls Moses to be the Hebrew people’s leader to liberate them from slavery in Egypt and lead them to the land God promised their ancestors. The story continues through Leviticus, in which their covenant obligations are described; Numbers, which recounts their forty years wandering through the wilderness; and Deuteronomy, which tells of their arrival at and entry into the promised land.

The story relates how God liberated the Hebrew people from the oppression of their Egyptian overlords. In this awesome demonstration of power, their God Yahweh showed that he cared so much about the oppression the Hebrews were suffering that he personally came down to rip them out of the domination of the mightiest empire then known to humanity. God wanted to create a covenant community and made it clear that even the mightiest human empire was powerless to stop it from happening.

God was not content to tinker with the structures of the Egyptian Empire in order to make a place for the covenant people. Instead, God removed them from their oppression and brought them into a new land where they could realize God’s dream for the ideal community. During their wanderings in the wilderness, the people learned that God was the ideal covenant partner who provided food and water and protected them from their enemies.

God and the people entered into a covenant relationship. The people learned God’s personal name—Yahweh—and God’s relentless demand for justice and right relationships. God’s guidelines for this new community were given to the people through Moses. By accepting God’s law as the guide for their community life, they began their journey with God.

**Israel’s Origins and Eminent Ancestors**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genesis 1–2</th>
<th>The creation narratives: divine order established</th>
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<tr>
<td>Genesis 3–5</td>
<td>Human disorder (sin) and its consequences</td>
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<tr>
<td>Genesis 6–11</td>
<td>Noah; the tower of Babel</td>
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<tr>
<td>Genesis 12–17</td>
<td>Abraham: called to create a covenant family</td>
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<tr>
<td>Genesis 18–23</td>
<td>Abraham; the city of Sodom</td>
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<tr>
<td>Genesis 24–35</td>
<td>Isaac, Esau and Jacob</td>
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<tr>
<td>Genesis 37–50</td>
<td>Joseph</td>
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A Quick Tour of Your Bible
Why God would choose the Hebrews from among all the peoples of the earth as covenant partners is a perplexing mystery. The meaning of this divine election can be discovered only by placing it in some wider context. The book of Genesis provides two contexts to help us understand this covenant. The first is the context of God’s relationship with all humanity; the second is the context of the Hebrew tribal traditions.

“Divine Scripture is the feast of wisdom, and the single books are the various dishes.”

—ST. AMBROSE (d. 397)
On the Duties of the Clergy, 1:165

Genesis 1–11 puts the Hebrew story in the overarching context of God’s choice of all humanity, in the persons of Adam and Eve, to be God’s covenant partner. The story sketches the recurring pattern of God’s relationship with humanity: God initiates a relationship, which is then disordered by human sin, thus evoking God’s terrifying judgment and the loss of the divine gifts, followed by an expanding sinfulness that poisons all human relationships.

But God does not give up. Even when sin has so mangled creation that God decides to wipe it out, God spares Noah and his family, who embody the chosen community. Eventually, sin again claims the world as its own until humanity tries to demonstrate its equality with God by building a tower to ascend to God instead of waiting for God to come down to earth. God retaliates by confusing human language, thus frustrating the human ability to communicate with one another and create a unified community.

But God does not give up. Genesis 12–50 relates the divine invitation to Abraham and his family to create God’s ideal covenant community. The thread of this hope, passing from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob in mysterious and surprising ways, reminded the Hebrews that God had been with them long before they knew who accompanied them on their journey. The story also relates how the Hebrew family ended up in Egypt because of Joseph and how God preserved them from harm. This also explains why the Hebrews were still in Egypt four hundred years later at the time of the exodus.

The Genesis narratives reveal that the stories of God’s relation first to humanity and then to Israel follow essentially the same plot. Persons are
called by God to become a community that is to be characterized by its right relationships in a covenant community. But human sin breaks down these right relationships and finally ruptures them, which leads to God’s judgment. Since as the Israelites learned, judgment is never the last word of their merciful and loving God, the covenant relationship is restored only because God wants it to be. God is characterized by a relentless commitment to creation and an insatiable desire to relate with humanity. (Note that God never makes covenants just with individuals but only with groups—Adam and Eve, Noah and his family, Abraham and his descendants, Jesus and his disciples—who are willing to create the kind of community God wants for all persons.)

*Life with God in the Promised Land*

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Joshua 1–6; 23, 24</strong></td>
<td>The conquest of the new land</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Judges 4–8; 13–16</strong></td>
<td>Charismatic leaders: Deborah, Gideon, and Samson</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1 Samuel 1–15</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1 Samuel 16–31; 2 Samuel 1</strong></td>
<td>Saul and David</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2 Samuel 2–12</strong></td>
<td>David and Nathan</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2 Samuel 13–20; 1 Kings 1–3</strong></td>
<td>David and Absalom</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1 Kings 8–12; 17–21; 2 Kings 1</strong></td>
<td>Solomon; the divided kingdom; Elijah</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2 Kings 2–13</strong></td>
<td>Elisha and Athaliah</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2 Kings 17–25</strong></td>
<td>Fall of Samaria and Jerusalem; exile</td>
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</table>

God’s presence not only creates the community but also unleashes the drama of its relationship with God. The historical books of the Old Testament report the exciting story of the Israelite community as it conquers the land (Joshua); structures itself in a loose confederation of twelve tribes under the guidance of charismatic judges (Judges); and then forms a magnificent kingdom under the leadership of David and Solomon (1 and 2 Samuel).

From this, the grandest time in the history of the Hebrew people, the story then describes the breakup of the kingdom after Solomon’s death into two kingdoms: Israel in the north (with ten tribes) and Judah in the south (with two tribes). Finally, the story culminates with the events leading to the annihilation of the northern kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians (721 BC) and the destruction of the southern kingdom of Judah by the Babylonians (587 BC), which resulted in the Judeans fifty-year exile (1 and 2 Kings).
In all of these political and social transformations, the guiding hand of God is evident. This is not just history, but salvation history—history that reveals God as present and active in the lives of people. God’s providence and prophets ensure that, amidst the human schemes of power politics, God’s design for the right way to live is never forgotten.

**New Testament Foundations: Jesus and Discipleship**

Once you are familiar with the story of God’s search for the right kind of community, you are ready to shift to the New Testament. Reading the New Testament is much more meaningful when you are familiar with the broad outlines of this Old Testament story. The New Testament then reveals God’s renewed initiative—with Jesus—for the right kind of community and how the relationship is continued in his community of disciples. The twin questions that should always guide your reading of the New Testament are, Who is Jesus? and What does it mean to belong to his discipleship community?

**The Gospels of Mark and Luke**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter(s)</th>
<th>Summary</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mark 1–3</td>
<td>Preparing the new way of relating to God</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mark 4:1–8:21</td>
<td>Building the new community for both Jews and Gentiles</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mark 8:22–12:44</td>
<td>On the way to Jerusalem to suffer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mark 14–16</td>
<td>Jesus’ passion, death and resurrection</td>
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<tr>
<td>Luke 1–2 (Matthew 1–2)</td>
<td>The infancy narratives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke 3:1–9:50</td>
<td>Jesus’ ministry in Galilee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acts 1–12</td>
<td>The Church in its Jewish environment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acts 13–28</td>
<td>The Church opens to the Gentiles</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

A good way to begin your New Testament reading is with the gospel accounts of Jesus’ life. Since Mark’s Gospel was most probably the first one written, it is the first one to read. Mark’s great achievement was to shape the many events of Jesus’ life into a proclamation of the Christian message and thus create a new form of literature that was more than a biography. He uses the story of Jesus’ life to proclaim the gospel message. He gives Jesus’ life a
narrative shape and anchors Jesus’ many sayings into particular life situations. Mark also stresses the importance of the ending, which is the good news that God, not death, triumphs. Mark’s good news is that death ends Jesus’ life but not his relationship with God. The resurrection shows that God’s creative power to give life triumphs over evil’s destructive desire to deal death.

Then read the two-volume work of Luke, which includes his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. Luke revises Mark’s Gospel by adding many sayings and teachings that were either unknown or unavailable to Mark. He also adds infancy narratives to demonstrate how Jesus’ mission and ministry are rooted in the Old Testament expectations of God’s divinely-commissioned messiah.

Most surprising of all, to his Gospel Luke adds a second volume, which we call the Acts of the Apostles, to show how Jesus’ mission and ministry is carried on by his community of disciples after his death. This exciting story traces the early Christian community’s growth from Peter’s Pentecost proclamation in Jerusalem to Paul’s missionary outreach to the Gentiles.

**Paul and His Letters**

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<tr>
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<th>Title</th>
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<tr>
<td>1 and 2 Thessalonians</td>
<td>Advice for converts to the Christian way</td>
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<tr>
<td>Philippians</td>
<td>Putting on the mind of Christ</td>
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<td>Colossians</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ephesians</td>
<td>The one Church: sign of the new creation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philemon</td>
<td>New freedom in Christ</td>
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When you have become familiar with the outline of Paul’s career from the Acts of the Apostles, you can read his letters to the different Christian communities located in the cities of the Gentile world. Reading these letters gives you an inside view of life in these communities as the early Christians struggled to discover what it meant to be a Christian in a world that knew little and cared even less about Jesus and his “good news.”

Reading these letters in their chronological order also helps you appreciate the development of Paul’s theological and practical understanding of
Christian life. These letters also offer a window into Paul’s personality. They lay bare how his personal experience of the risen Christ shaped his vision, sharpened his values and guided his behavior as a servant of Christ.

The Gospel of John

| John 1–4 | Book of Signs 1: Jesus and the response of faith |
| John 5–12 | Book of Signs 2: Jesus and the Jewish feasts |
| John 13–17 | Book of Glory 1: Jesus’ farewell discourse |
| John 18–21 | Book of Glory 2: Jesus’ passion, death, and resurrection |

The Gospel of John demonstrates how different the gospel accounts of Jesus’ life can be. Although not directly based on Mark or any of the other gospels, John’s way of telling the good news of Jesus is rooted in the same Christian traditions. Composed near the end of the first century, John’s Gospel offers a unique perspective on the divinity of Jesus and on the non-hierarchical character of John’s community. Jesus is the divine revealer, God’s Son who has come down from God to show us who God is and what God wants. He teaches in long speeches and performs distinctive signs that help us understand his person and his message. Before he returns, he gives us the Holy Spirit to abide with us in his place.

Christian Apocalyptic Expectations

| Mark 13; Luke 21; Matthew 24–25 | Apocalyptic discourses of Jesus before his death |
| Revelation 1–3 | The vision of Christ in the Christian community |
| Revelation 4–11 | The vision of Christ in the cosmos |
| Revelation 12–19:10 | The vision of Christ in human history |
| Revelation 19:11–22:21 | The vision of Christ and God’s final victory |

Another emphasis in early Christianity was an attitude and its written expression that scholars today call apocalyptic (Greek meaning “to uncover or reveal”). Christian apocalypticism expresses the eager anticipation of God’s total triumph over present evils and the establishment of a new order—a new creation—that would be free from oppression, injustice, violence and suffering. This attitude and writing stresses that God’s final transformation of our disordered world into a rightly ordered one is just around the corner.
The book of Revelation is an imaginative description of what will happen when God comes to create justice in our unjust world. John describes his mystical journey into heaven where, from this divine perspective, he is allowed to see how God’s kingdom will come and how God’s will “will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). Through his revelatory visions of Christ in the Christian community (1–3), Christ in the cosmos (4–11), Christ in human history (12–19) and Christ’s final victory (19–22), John paints a vivid tableau of God’s triumph through Christ and the final transformation of our world into the one that God envisioned from the beginning of creation.

The Old Testament Revisited: Exile and Restoration

The next step in your reading journey is to return to the Old Testament to learn more about the story of the Israelite community and its life in relationship to God. The Israelites’ distinctive identity came from their covenant relationship with God. But keeping the covenant was never an easy thing to do. In fact, at one point their kingdom was destroyed and they were banished into exile. This devastating experience forced them to rethink their relationship to God and to one another. The exile (and the apparent end of their covenant relationship) and the unexpected restoration of the covenant by God’s power are the focus of these readings.

The Pre-Exilic Prophets

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<td>Hosea</td>
<td>Covenant fidelity and infidelity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Isaiah of Jerusalem (Isaiah 1–39)</td>
<td>God’s Word and power politics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Micah</td>
<td>Reformer from the country</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zephaniah</td>
<td>Hope beyond judgment</td>
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<td>Nahum</td>
<td>God’s justice for Assyria</td>
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<td>Jeremiah</td>
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Reading the prophets will bring you back to the political and social events that shaped and reshaped the Jewish community during the period from about 750 to 400 BC. But now these crises are seen from the religious viewpoint of the prophets rather than from the political viewpoint of the
kings. As lobbyists for God’s agenda for the right kind of community, the prophets warn both kings and communities of the consequences of making decisions that are contrary to God’s plan.

You will be challenged by Amos’s demands for social justice and Hosea’s daring portrait of God’s faithfulness to the covenant despite the people’s infidelity. Isaiah counsels kings to trust in God rather than in foreign alliances and demonstrates over and over that God’s covenant demands have sobering consequences for those who disregard them. Sin inevitably brings God’s judgment because God’s holiness cannot be taken for granted nor can God be manipulated. Micah, Zephaniah and Nahum all develop varieties of the twin themes of God’s certain judgment of sin and our hope for restoration.

Jeremiah introduces us to the personal anguish of a prophetic spokesman for God. He was called to proclaim God’s way of life to a community on its way to death in exile. They were unwilling to listen to him and even more drastically had no desire to hear and heed God’s word. Jeremiah’s powerful poetic images and personal prayers match up well with the unimaginable and devastating reality of God’s judgment on the kingdom of Judah.

Judah will be destroyed because it replaced the covenant obligations of fidelity and obedience with idolatry, infidelity, apostasy and disobedience. The kingdom forgot its first-commandment obligation to center its life on God and instead organized life around objects that it thought it could control. Since the covenant had not been kept, God’s destructive and punishing judgment was inevitable. Announcing this message makes Jeremiah both sad because the people will not change and angry because his word is not listened to. He knows that without the people’s conversion, there can be no hope for a reversal of God’s impending judgment.

But Jeremiah also sees clearly what nobody else can even imagine: God does not give up. When all else fails, God will continue to be faithful, but in ways that demand death to the people’s cherished institutions—the religious temple and the political kingdom. Jeremiah recognizes that God is now doing something that will entail a massive discontinuity with the whole past of the people. Their temple will be destroyed, their land will be taken away and they will be displaced. But through this trauma God will remain faithful to the covenant and establish a new covenant in the purified hearts of the people.
Jeremiah exemplifies the challenge of relating to God. His life illustrates the elusive, surprising and mysterious ways that God deals with each of us. Jeremiah shows how someone meets the challenges of each step in the process of relating to God: call, commitment, co-mission, conversion and cost. Through him we learn how faith is possible in a time of crisis. He shows us through his words and actions what it means to be a prophet, one who hears the word of God and responds wholeheartedly. Despite the terrible cost to himself, Jeremiah was willing do anything so that God would be recognized.

Exilic and Post-Exilic Prophets

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In the depths of exile, the Israelites faced the gravest crisis of their existence. What kind of a God had they tied themselves to? The exilic and post-exilic prophets deal especially with this crisis of identity and meaning. During the exile, they asked the most haunting questions of all: Why did this happen to us? Was God absent or angry or maybe even powerless to help?

Their answer produced a new and more theologically sophisticated understanding of God as not merely one among many gods but as the only God there is. In response, the post-exilic community focused on Torah, Territory, and Temple—aiming to be a holy people in a holy land with a holy dwelling place for God—to guide every aspect of the community’s restoration.

What do you do when your world has shattered? More important, what do you do when your dreams have shattered? Ezekiel is an example of a prophet who ministers in a situation of profound discontinuity. Discerning the meaning of new situations always requires imaginative thinking. Ezekiel, whose personal weirdness is matched only by his zeal for God’s ways, is the master of street theater who proclaims God’s message through his dramatic
(and often eccentric and erratic) behavior. He first struggles to explain what God is doing in bringing about the exile and rejecting the present covenant. Then—in memorable images such as a field of dry bones coming to life—he describes what God will do in the future to restore and renew the covenant.

Ezekiel urges the people to understand that their relation to God moves through stages from calling to covenant, from commitment to obligation, from sin to judgment and finally from punishment in exile to restoration. Though the covenant and its divinely given institutions—the temple and the monarchy—were lost through mismanagement, God would surprisingly restore the covenant community. This cycle now discloses the full pattern of God’s plan for salvation. Knowing this, God’s holy people can avoid the mistakes of the past that broke the covenant and provoked God’s judgment.

After fifty years in exile in Babylon, the Judeans begin to hear rumors of world-shaking events. The dreaded Babylonian Empire is about to be crushed by the Persian armies of Cyrus the Great. In this crisis, God reminds the people that when God is with them, there is nothing to fear. Their future will be radically different because God is present in power to transform their exile into a homecoming—a new exodus experience.

Since it is impossible to realize what we cannot imagine, the Judean exiles can’t deal with freedom and a restored covenant without some preparation. Second Isaiah, the author of chapters 40–55 of the book of Isaiah, marshals his poetic power to speak a word of comfort and to evoke in the imagination of his audience the astounding message of a new homecoming. From the depths of exile, Isaiah recognizes that God is doing something new.

Isaiah’s exquisite poetry urges the people to participate in this new future with God. Isaiah recalls their history with God in order to reaffirm their identity. To renew their community, they must relive the exodus experience that formed them into a suitable covenant community for God. This poetry of God’s new creation was one of the most frequently cited parts of the Old Testament for early Christians. No doubt they saw themselves as those who were now living out the fulfillment of Isaiah’s imaginative description of God’s promise of a new creation.

On a more practical level, after returning from exile Third Isaiah (56-66) inspires hope in continued restoration despite the frustrations of rebuilding
their community life. Haggai and Zechariah successfully focus the people’s energy for the reconstructing the Jerusalem temple. This second temple, begun about 536 BC amidst the poverty, chaos and exploitation of the return from Babylon, was initially completed and dedicated in 515. It was constantly refurbished and updated until the time of Jesus. A lavish remodeling occurred during the time of King Herod the Great (37–4 BC). But the Romans destroyed it in AD 70 and it has never been rebuilt. Its original foundation stones make up the Wailing Wall on the temple mount in Jerusalem today.

The Restoration after the Exile

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As always throughout human history, God’s presence initiates a new relationship. So in the depths of despair and the silence of the Judean exile, God spoke a new word that invited the people into a new and restored covenant relationship. This word empowered the exiles to shake off their oppression and be free to return home. Delivered from its exile, the community could return to its land and restore its community life. It would strive again to be the holy community that God had always wanted by following all the guidelines of God’s Law (the Torah) and worshiping the presence of God in the people’s midst in the rebuilt temple. This reorganization required a constant rethinking of who God was and who they were as God’s people.

Several biblical books chart the progress of the restoration and illustrate the holiness and careful observance of covenant obligations (Torah) that characterize the postexilic Judean community. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah portray how the urgent desire to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem is coupled with the desire to build a spiritual wall of separation between the restored community and all other nations. Ezra tells the story from the
priestly viewpoint, concentrating on the restoration of holiness to the temple, the land and the people. Nehemiah tells it from the viewpoint of the Persian governor, struggling to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and defend the land from its surrounding enemies.

God’s covenant people demonstrated their concern for holiness by guarding the boundaries of their community, their nation and their own bodies. These boundaries created a distinctive Judean identity, which invited hostility from their neighbors and encouraged isolation and an inward-looking attitude. The book of Ruth, although set in the earlier time of King David, reflects some of the post-exilic Judean tension between being a closed and exclusive community or an open and inclusive one that would be more tolerant of outsiders and cooperative with its Gentile neighbors.

The books of 1 and 2 Chronicles are a revisionist history of the Israelite people seen through the lens of the post-exilic restoration. The author, or Chronicler, retells the history of the people found in the books of Samuel and Kings, but now with the particular restoration emphasis that stresses how religion must dominate both the social institutions of family and marriage and also the political structures of the nation. What makes a great political leader is not his wealth, warfare, wisdom or concubines, but his fidelity to God and to *Torah* and his worship in the Jerusalem temple. Everything else is secondary.

A second feature of this postexilic history is the author’s attempt to show that the tiny minority of Judeans, especially the returned exiles, are the true inheritors of the promises to all Israel. Like any minority in any era, they conduct a massive propaganda campaign to show that their minority Judean viewpoint is really that of all true Israelites. But to appropriate for themselves what has previously belonged to all Israel, the Chronicler explain why the line of descent can be traced to them alone. Just as in so many of the biblical stories where the younger brother or the unlikely one gets the inheritance, so the Chronicler indicates that the inheritance comes only to them for their fidelity and their worship of God. The northern tribes have freely chosen to forsake their covenant relationship with God and so have become schismatics.

Amidst the difficulties of restoration, two prophetic teachers arise to help the people understand how to detect God’s presence in their precarious struggles for community identity and survival. Malachi reinforces the
demand for holiness by teaching through short catechetical dialogues, while Joel uses oracles coupled with ritual to proclaim his message of God’s special relationship and care for the people even in the midst of a devastating locust plague. The different approaches of these two prophets can help us discover how to make God’s Word more applicable in our own situations.

**Hebrew Poetry and Songs**

| Song of Songs | The dream of a loving relationship |
| Psalms | The five books of David’s Torah |
| Psalms 1, 15, 22, 34, 51, 104, 119, 141 | Hebrew poetry and its use in Christian liturgy |
| Psalms 3, 5, 6, 88 | Individual laments |
| Psalms 14, 74, 80, 137 | Communal laments |
| Psalms 32, 38, 130 | Psalms of repentance |
| Psalms 109, 139:19–22 | Curse psalms |
| Psalms 23, 27, 62, 91, 131 | Psalms of confidence and trust |
| Psalms 30, 92, 116 | Individual thanksgiving psalms |
| Psalms 65, 118, 124 | Communal thanksgiving psalms |
| Psalms 8, 29, 33, 48, 100, 113, 148, 150 | Psalms of praise |
| Psalms 2, 45, 72, 101, 110, 132 | Royal psalms |
| Psalms 78, 105, 106, 135, 136 | Reviewing the story of Israel through the psalms |
| Psalms 50, 82 | Prophetic psalms |
| Psalms 37, 49 | Wisdom psalms |
| Psalms 47, 95, 96 | Psalms celebrating Yahweh as king |
| Psalm 89 | A messianic psalm |

Poets speak through the language of images, which are the poet’s way to make the invisible visible (which is always why we cannot talk about God without using images). By using *metaphors* (from the Greek *metapherein*, “to carry over or transfer”), the poet helps us transfer the meanings of our familiar experience to a new and unfamiliar experience. The images of metaphorical language capture in concrete ways the many-layered complexity of an experience in order to evoke our own corresponding experiences (not just our ideas!). The poet’s motto is “You had to be there—but since you weren’t, I’ll try to re-create the experience for you through my poem!”

The Song of Songs expresses the mystery and power of love by celebrating the whole range of experiences of a man and woman in love. The poet
speaks through the language of images rather than with clinical or analytic detachment. By including this apparently humanistic book in the canon of Scripture, this changes its context and read it differently. Its meaning is not restricted only to the love of a man and a woman but also becomes an image of God’s love for us as a community and as individuals. Were this book not in our Bible, we might never imagine that God loves us so passionately!

The book of Psalms expresses the entire range of experiences and emotions that the Jewish people had in their relationship with God. As the lyric expression of the prayer life of Israel, the psalms provide examples of the proper attitudes, values and theology that the post-exilic community celebrated in their lives and in their temple worship. The psalms are the poetic expression of the right way for the people to relate to God and to others.

As poems of our human spiritual experience, the psalms invite every human person and group to somehow share what they express. Thus the psalms become examples to us (individuals or communities) of how we can also respond to God, regardless of our situation. The psalms express the whole spectrum of our life experience: our orientation to God (hymns of praise and well-being in God’s presence); our disorientation from God (songs of lament and loss); and our reorientation to God (hymns of thanks and restoration).

“If the psalm prays, you too pray. If it laments, so should you. If it renders thanks, so you also rejoice with it. If it hopes, so you too. If it speaks in the accents of fear, you also tremble with it, for all that is written therein is meant to be a mirror for us.”

—ST. AUGUSTINE (d. ca. 430)
Sermon on Psalm 30

The psalms mirror our relationship with God and reflect the way that ancient people understood their experience of how to relate to God in their lives. Laments express what happens when the covenant relationship is not going very well, either because God is perceived as distant and inactive or because we recognize that our sinfulness creates discord and jeopardizes the relationship. On the other hand, hymns express our experience when the covenant relationship is going well because God has come near and acted with power to change our situation and save and bless us. Hymns of praise declare our wonder and joy at God’s mighty deeds, whether in history or in
creation. The intent of these hymns is to give honor to God, to shout God’s praises and let everyone know what a wonderful God we have. Hymns of confidence or trust give voice to our commitment to God and to our relationship with God. Hymns of thanksgiving recognize the many gifts bestowed by God, our heavenly benefactor, and fulfill our reciprocal covenant obligation to give thanks for all these benefits.

**Old and New Testaments Revisited: God’s Word in the Hellenistic World**

The final step on your reading journey follows the Judean experience from the end of the exile until the time of Jesus, and the Christian experience of transition from an initially Jewish to a Gentile (non-Jewish) community. This stretch of history was divided into two periods, dominated first by the Persian Empire (538–333 BC) and then by the Greek, or Hellenistic, Empire resulting from the world conquests of Alexander the Great (after 333).

During this time, the Judeans struggled to maintain their distinctive religious identity despite being a colonial people under the domination of the superpowers of their day. In their homeland, they restored their temple and their social institutions under the guidance of their priests. Outside the Holy Land, in the Jewish diaspora (Greek for “dispersion,” used by Judeans to describe the world outside the Holy Land), scattered pockets of Judeans or Jews as they were now called established themselves especially in the larger cities that were springing up as the centers of Hellenistic cultural life. Greek culture and language became the universal standard for commerce and culture throughout the entire Mediterranean world. When Christianity emerged from Judaism in the first century AD, it flourished especially in the cities where the diverse population was unified by the Greek language and culture.

The Old Testament books composed during this period reflect this culture war between Judaism and Hellenism. Jewish texts reinforce Jewish identity and encourage Jews to be proud of their heritage. Traditional Jewish wisdom literature was transformed so that it could hold its own in dialogue with Hellenistic philosophy. Fictional heroes modeled genuine Jewish values and behavior. Many books promoted resistance, and some even advocated outright revolt, against the toxic influence of Hellenistic culture.
The New Testament texts reflect the turbulent transition during the second half of the first century from Christian communities that were at first almost exclusively Jewish to ones mixed with non-Jews to ones almost exclusively Gentile by the end of the century. Coping with the problems of this transition, Christian authors like Matthew tried to retrieve their Jewish heritage to meet the developing problems confronting them as they participated in the Christian mission to the nations throughout the Hellenistic world.

**Wisdom in Israel**

| Proverbs 1–9 | The worldview of wisdom |
| Proverbs 10, 16, 22–24, 28, 30–31 | Wisdom in its cultural contexts |
| Habakkuk, Job 1–14 | Questioning the accepted traditions |
| Job 15–28 | Wisdom challenged: God on trial |
| Job 29–42 | God on trial: The Creator’s defense |
| Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth) | The failure of wisdom |
| Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) | Wisdom reaffirmed |
| 1–4, 14–18, 20–23 | *Torah* and wisdom are one |
| Sirach 24–26, 30, 34–36, 38–39, 42–51 | Praise of wisdom and God’s constant fidelity |

In the biblical library, the self-help section is called the wisdom literature. This collection helps people cope with the complexities of everyday life, especially sickness and suffering, death and disaster. It gives a practical understanding of how the world and society worked, and so helps a person understand who he or she is and how to fit into the larger scheme of things.

Since the wisdom literature did not rely on divine revelation but on practical experience and the observation of nature, it formulated traditional advice for responsible living that the Jews shared with many ancient Near Eastern peoples. The Jews, though, sought to merge this secular tradition with the religious guidelines of their covenant instruction (*Torah*).

The book of Proverbs consists of short, memorable sayings, shaped poetically for memory and meaning and drawn from human experience to be helpful for right living. Since proverbs are practical, they function in many different ways for people in communities, including observation, command,
admonition and prohibition. In general, they help to preserve tradition, ponder the mysteries of life and promote proper behavior in the community.

Since most ancient people did not read or write, whatever was handed on had to be memorized. So the wisdom material is usually formulated in brief, memorable sayings that are poetic and often contain vivid images of good and bad behavior. They are most often developed in parallel couplets in which the second line usually either reinforces the first by stressing similarity or contrasts with the first by stressing difference.

In particular, Hebrew wisdom juxtaposes truths to tease out new meanings by variant repetition (not simply repeating but leading the mind on to a new idea through slight variations). Good proverbs are characterized by being memorable, true to experience, practical and useful, and universally applicable. Each proverb is like a snapshot of a vast panorama that needs to be complemented by other viewpoints. Since no proverb can totally capture the complexity of life’s mystery, the truth of each proverb must be taken in context with that of others to create the whole wisdom picture.

The traditional patron of wisdom is King Solomon, whose Hebrew name is related to peace, “shalom.” Peace is the result of living in harmony with both the comprehensive order that God established at creation and the ideal for the covenant community revealed in God’s Torah. The king’s role was to bring about this harmony for the whole community.

In addition to the positive dimension of wisdom found in Proverbs, there is a probing, questioning, dark side to this wisdom material in the prophet Habakkuk, the just and innocent sufferer Job, and the skeptical Ecclesiastes, or Qoheleth. Job and Qoheleth relentlessly question the customary belief that God’s justice must reward good behavior and punish wrongdoing. Because their experience verifies that too often good people suffer and the wicked prosper, they share the perspective that life is in fact twisted and conclude that God must be responsible for the twisting!

So a real and haunting question about God emerges. Job is optimistic and believes that we can know how and why God acts. Job shifts from the traditional view that God is just and must reward good and punish evil in this life to a view that God’s ways are right and just but we will never know exactly how the mystery of God’s justice works.
Qoheleth, however, is pessimistic and thinks that we cannot know these things. He finds that life is without justice and concludes that it is hollow and that death is preferable. Since death is the final end of everything and there are no guarantees about how anything will work out after one has died, trying to control or change things is therefore futile. Why bother to look to the future which no one can control? Instead, concentrate on getting whatever little pleasures have fallen to you along the way to death.

One possible way to summarize some of the basic wisdom themes is to remember that Wisdom builds her house on seven pillars (Proverbs 9:1), which is also the number of letters in Solomon’s English name!

Successful living comes through acquiring wisdom. Order in the world was assigned by God at creation and is discovered through wisdom. Life to the fullest—physical, social, economic, spiritual—is the result of wisdom. Our world is a struggle against the forces of chaos, which brings suffering and death. Meaning can be challenged by our experience, but trust in God can overcome doubt. Only one God means that creation and history can be united in one system. No one who finds wisdom will be cut off from deathless fellowship with God.

The books of Sirach and Wisdom reinstate the traditional wisdom by incorporating it into the Jewish religious worldview. The instructions of secular wisdom and those of religious law or Torah can be united because there is only one God, who is both the creator of the universe and the lord of salvation history. These later wisdom books encourage Jews to seek for wisdom not only in creation but also in the history of their relationship to God.

Sirach rethinks his wisdom theology in the light of God’s revealed will found in the Law. Since there is only one God, there can be only one divine guideline for the people, whether it is expressed in the order of creation or the explicit commands of Torah. Wisdom’s task is to appreciate God’s providence and power both as creator and as lord of history.

The book of Wisdom combines the Jewish traditions of creation and salvation history with Hellenistic forms of thought. It speaks to a broad spectrum of Jews. To faithful Jews, it offers an integration of creation and God’s law. To wavering Jews, it encourages fidelity to their ancestral traditions that set them apart from other peoples. To unfaithful Jews, it invites a return to their
As Hellenism spread throughout the Mediterranean world after the conquests of Alexander the Great, who died in 323 BC, Israelite identity was threatened by Hellenistic culture both in the diaspora and in their Judean homeland. The threat was not so much to eradicate their Jewishness but to change it so radically that it no longer existed as genuine Jewishness. Diaspora Jews, who lived outside the Holy Land amidst Gentiles, were confronted with serious challenges to their Jewish lifestyle. Their primary question was whether a Jew could be Hellenistic and still remain a Jew.

At the core of Israelite identity was their election to be God’s covenant people and the consequent obligations that set them apart from other peoples. So the Jews often adopted a countercultural lifestyle that opposed Hellenism by refusing to worship civic gods because of their belief that their God alone was truly divine. They often provoked hostility from their neighbors because of their practice of ritual circumcision as a sign of covenant belonging, their kosher food laws and their refusal to intermarry with Gentiles. To reinforce their threatened identity they produced a literature of cultural resistance in the diaspora and a politics of national resistance in Judea.

Several biblical books reflect this conflict between the Jewish lifestyle and the Hellenistic culture in which they lived. Jonah, Esther, Tobit and Baruch offer readers several concrete examples of the lofty ideals of Jewish
spirituality that could flourish even in a pagan environment. These books offer examples to serve as guidelines for being a Jew in the Greek world.

The books of 1 and 2 Maccabees tell the story of Judean political defiance in 168–164 BC, when resistance exploded into a successful armed revolt after the Greek ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes desecrated the temple. The Judean “holy war” to defend their land, reconsecrate the temple and make sure it remained holy created an independent nation under the rule of the Hasmonean family that lasted until the Romans conquered them in 63 BC.

Although the events they describe are set in earlier times, the books of Daniel and Judith were also written in this revolutionary period. Daniel gives both examples of God’s care for faithful Jews in their hostile environment and also imaginative depictions of God’s eventual triumph over evil in our world. It offers hope in times of crisis by showing that God will deliver the people if they remain faithful to the covenant. The book of Judith uses a fictional story to encourage resistance and promote the desire for Jewish freedom.

**Christianity in the Hellenistic World**

| Matthew 1–4 | Matthew’s Gospel: guide for Christian discipleship |
| Matthew 5–7 | Jesus’ sermon on the mount |
| Matthew 8–10 | The gospel of the kingdom comes in power |
| Matthew 11–17 | Alternative responses to the kingdom of heaven |
| Matthew 18–23 | The new relationship under stress |
| Matthew 24–28 | The turning of the ages |
| 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus | Handing on the Pauline legacy |
| James | Teaching Christian wisdom |
| Jude | Defending faith and tradition |
| 1, 2, and 3 John | Coping with dissension and division |
| 1 and 2 Peter | Belonging, and encouragement for a new life |
| Hebrews | Jesus: mediator of all and eternal high priest |

The early Christian communities also had problems finding their place in the Hellenistic culture. The Gospel of Matthew, the letter to the Hebrews and the pastoral and catholic letters show how various communities dealt with the problems concerning authority, leadership, doctrine, moral behavior and organization in the newly formed Christian communities. These texts also
illustrate the how Christianity in the first century developed from a loosely organized group to a more structured community.

Matthew revised Mark’s gospel life of Jesus for a Jewish community that was confronted by the influx of Gentiles who were taking over the Church after Paul’s missionary success. He shaped his gospel to teach his community to embrace its Jewish tradition because this heritage was the foundation for the Christian way of life. (Like today, he knew that knowing the Old Testament was important for Christians.) But he also stressed that the community’s future meant participating in the Church’s evangelizing mission to the Gentiles. By portraying Jesus as both the fulfillment of the hopes of Judaism and as the inaugurator of the new Christian way of relating to God, Matthew’s Gospel serves as a powerful tool for conversion and co-mission for his community.

“In giving us the Son, God’s only Word, God spoke everything to us at once in this sole Word—and has no more to say.”

—ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS (d. 1591)

The pastoral letters are the later Pauline letters. They portray Paul not so much as a community founder but rather as an aging pastor whose final care for the community is expressed by appointing successors to maintain the communities after he is gone. They claim Paul’s authority for the growing institutionalization of the Church. These letters have always been grouped together (they might even have been written as a group) and are best read in the order of 1 Timothy, Titus, and 2 Timothy. They relate Paul’s advice for establishing similar administrative offices and pastoral traditions both for communities that he had founded (Timothy in Ephesus) and also for communities that he did not found (Titus on Crete).

The letter to the Hebrews and the catholic letters of Peter, James, John, and Jude sketch how different communities confronted the problems of defining a Christian way of life in a world that was often hostile to their beliefs and behaviors. Since the Christian Church today still struggles to discover authentic applications of the gospel message for our times, these letters offer models for our search for suitable answers to today’s complex problems.
Where Do You Go from Here?

Once you have finished your general tour through the Bible, then the real adventure begins. Just as the journey to a new country cannot be limited to following the normal tourist agenda, so our biblical journey cannot be limited to a onetime reading. We must go back again and again to learn all we can about the people, places and events of the biblical world.

Your local public or academic library contains many books on the Bible written by competent, scholarly guides. One way to begin your more detailed study is to choose a biblical book that you would like to know more about. Then choose a beginning or intermediate commentary and begin to work your way through the biblical book in greater detail. In this way you discover the authors who speak not only to your mind but also to your heart.

Although on a journey it is always important to see the major tourist attractions, getting off the beaten path allows you to discover and appreciate more fully the experience of those who live there. So after your initial reading, stop being a tourist. Get off the bus and go where you want! Don’t be afraid to wander from the well-trodden paths to search out and explore something that really interests you. Ask the questions that fascinate you. Follow your own pathways and discover the surprises that God has waiting for you through your Bible reading.

Questions for Reflection and Group Discussion

1. What are the benefits of beginning your Bible reading with the Exodus experience rather than the book of Genesis?
2. What is the significance of each of the two major parts of the book of Genesis (chapters 1–11 and 12–50)?
3. Describe the role of the Old Testament prophets. Why would this description also be an apt way to describe the work of Jesus?
4. Explain to a friend what a gospel is.
5. What was the purpose of the wisdom literature? Would it still be helpful today? Why or why not?
Anytime we pick up the Bible to read it, we can for the most part read the words we find there without too much trouble. Our problems and disagreements are not usually about what the words say but rather about what they mean. Reading for meaning is a skill that, like any other, must be learned and developed through practice. Being a more skillful Bible reader will depend on using good methods to discover the meaning of what we read.

“No man ever believes that the Bible means what it says: he is always convinced that it says what he means.”

—GEORGE BERNARD SHAW (d. 1950)

We must learn not only to recognize the Bible’s words, but to understand their meaning so that we can apply the message to our life. Reading any text, especially an ancient one like the Bible, will always be challenging. But learning to read for the meaning of Scripture (or should we really say the meanings of Scripture?) must always be our goal. So it might be helpful to examine the reading process again so that we can get the most out of it.

One Bible, Many Meanings

As people discover when they share their biblical insights with their family, friends, co-workers or faith-sharing groups, the meanings we discover in the Bible seem endless. One reason for this is that our minds can never fully grasp the divinely revealed mysteries it contains. But the Bible text does guide us and help us discover and understand our relationship with God. It also challenges us and calls into question who we are and how we live.
Another reason for so many different meanings is that meanings change when contexts change. When our reading situation and our personal needs change, so will what we discover in the Bible. Sooner or later we learn that whatever we think we now know about God and about Christ is never the complete and final answer. Being in a relationship with someone is a never-ending surprise about both the other and ourselves. So we must learn to live the Bible’s questions and let them challenge us. When what we read makes us feel uncomfortable, we can then be sure that this discomfort is a sign from God about where we need to grow spiritually.

Reading for Meaning

Normally we read so habitually that it seems as if the words of the text leap from the page into our minds with immediate clarity. Because we have clear ideas, we assume that those ideas must be the ones the author intended by the words we read on the page. So we might assume that reading the Bible will be as easy as reading our daily newspaper. We forget that reading our newspaper is a skill that has been mastered over many years of practice. To do it well we need some specialized skills to deal with the many different types of writing that we encounter.

“Read often, and study as much as you can; let sleep overtake you with a book in your hand; when your head nods, may it sink on a holy page.”

—ST. JEROME (d. 420)
Letter 22

When we’re reading the newspaper we hardly ever notice the many subtle shifts that we automatically make as readers. Each kind of writing (which in literary terms is called its form, or genre) actually guides the way we read it. As we move from the front page news to business and stock reports, sports, editorials, entertainment, comics, etc., each type of writing triggers different expectations and thus demands special strategies for deciphering it.

Reading the Bible requires this same kind of skill. The Bible’s content or message always comes packaged in some specific literary form. Since the Bible is not just one book but a collection of many books featuring various
types of writing (poetry, narratives, proverbs, letters and so forth), each book creates expectations that require a specific reading strategy to determine that book’s distinctive meanings. Furthermore, the different types of writing function to entertain, inform, persuade and move us to action. So when we read the Bible, we must attend not only to each book’s content (what is said) but also to its form (how it is said) and its function (why it is said).

Reading is an essential way of forming and reforming ourselves. Bible reading contributes to this because it demands a new type of involvement. As readers, we cannot just skim the surface, amassing bits of unconnected information. Despite the promises we often hear, there is no such thing as instant wisdom. Genuine wisdom requires the patient process of making the connections between facts and relating them to form the bigger picture. Biblical literacy is measured by assimilation, not accumulation.

Reading for meaning demands that we discover how what we read connects with what we experience. Reading a sacred book that we believe reveals the person and activity of God requires penetrating beyond the surface to the hidden depths of reality. Since the Bible mediates between our familiar world and that of a richer spiritual world infused with God’s presence, by learning to read the Bible we also learn to read our lives at a deeper, spiritual level.

**The ABCs of Bible Reading**

Our goal in reading the Bible is to let it change us so that we can live our relationships with God and with others in a fuller, more Christlike way. It helps to have a handy method as we go about our task of reading. Over my many years of teaching Scripture to adults, I have developed a procedure for reading Scripture that makes it as easy as ABC! This technique focuses on the three basic steps of our reading:

- **A**pproaching the text
- **B**reaking open the text
- **C**onnecting the text to our life

If we follow these steps, we will pay attention to the most important factors necessary to arrive at an adequate interpretation of any text.
In order to illustrate this ABC method, let’s take a specific biblical text to work with. Find the Acts of the Apostles in your New Testament. Then turn to chapter 8, verses 26-40 for the story of Philip the deacon and the Ethiopian pilgrim who is reading the book of the prophet Isaiah on his way home from worshiping in Jerusalem. I have also chosen this story because it is a lot like our own situation when we first pick up the Bible to read it. It also demonstrates the ABC method in action.

**Approaching the Text: Examining Our Assumptions**

As readers, what we get out of a text depends largely on what we bring to it. If you have ever discussed Scripture with a group or debated with someone trying to convert you, you know how true this is. The written words are fixed on the page and so everybody reads the same words, but they discover many different meanings. Some of this dissimilarity arises from the personal differences in knowledge and experience that readers bring to their interpretation of the text. Other differences arise from the interests that guide their reading and from the personal connections that they make between the text and their lives. Our personal attitudes, experiences, knowledge, intelligence, desires, needs and abilities always influence our reading.

“For as the divine Word stimulates the wise with mysteries, so it often kindles the simple with an obvious statement.”

—**POPE ST. GREGORY I (THE GREAT) (d. 604)**

Letter to Leander

When we read the Bible, we approach the text with two levels of assumptions. First, we bring a whole set of background assumptions about ourselves as readers, about the text as sacred and about the process of interpretation. But we also are guided by more immediate assumptions about being able to find some meaning in this text for our own lives.

Becoming more aware of these background assumptions is the general preparation, which is different from the more immediate reason we might pick up the Bible. These general assumptions guide everything we do, even if we do not always consciously attend to them. This remote (as opposed
to immediate) preparation might even be something we decided years ago, yet it still influences our reading now. The reflection we have been doing in this book helps us clarify our thinking about these controlling assumptions. Although they are seldom spelled out in complete detail, these background assumptions can influence every step of our reading journey. Unless we become more conscious of them at some point, they are liable to distort our reading. How would assumptions distort our reading? For one thing, assumptions often cover up the limitations of our own viewpoint. For another, many assumptions arise from our own prejudices and, unless unmasked, tend to strengthen rather than correct those prejudices.

“Owing to the depth of Scripture itself, everyone does not receive it in one and the same sense, but one in one way and another in another interprets the declarations of the same writer, so that it seems possible to elicit from it as many opinions as there are people.”

—ST. VINCENT OF LERINS (d. ca. 445)
Commonitorium, II.5

Whenever we want to read the Bible, we can get to the root of our more immediate personal assumptions by asking some basic questions about what we are seeking now from our Bible reading. Notice that these questions are focused on “right now” and do not necessarily try to uncover the many background assumptions about reading and about the Bible that are influencing us!

- What is going on in my life now that points me toward the Bible?
- Why would I want to read it rather than some other book?
- What do I want or expect to discover from reading it?
- What questions, concerns or needs do I wish to answer or to clarify?

When we become conscious of our personal reasons for wanting to read the Bible, we become more aware of our focus in approaching the text. We can focus on the theological issue of who God is or how God acts, or on historical issues about when and where the events described happened, or on psychological issues about what motivations or values prompted the people’s choices. We can also focus on the application for our own problems by seeing how the biblical story is our story. In short, there is no end to the possible approaches we can take in approaching the biblical text.
**Breaking Open the Text: What It Says and What It Means**

Good reading demands both an understanding of the words used and some context for identifying their meaning. Breaking open the meaning of a text demands two stages. First we must ask ourselves *what the text says*, and then *what it means*. The first issue focuses on the words of the text and how they fit together into a coherent unity. The second issue concerns how the words refer to realities outside of the text itself.

To understand *what a biblical text says* we need to rely on an accurate modern translation like the *New American Bible Revised Edition* (NABRE) or the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV, use the annotated version with the helpful scholarly notes). First read the selected passage all the way through without looking at any footnotes or other material. Sit quietly with the reading for a minute, reflecting on it. If there are words or phrases or religious terms which are not clear, look them up in a dictionary or a Bible dictionary. As a clue for determining meaning, notice also what type of writing this is. At the least, determine whether it is prose or poetry.

> “Catholic exegesis does not claim any particular scientific method as its own. It recognizes that one of the aspects of biblical texts is that they are the work of human authors, who employed both their own capacities for expression and the means which their age and social context put at their disposal. Consequently, Catholic exegesis freely makes use of the scientific methods and approaches which allow a better grasp of the meaning of texts in their linguistic, literary, socio-cultural, religious and historical contexts, while explaining them as well through studying their sources and attending to the personality of each author.”

—PONTIFICAL BIBLICAL COMMISSION

*The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993)

After we know what the text says, we are ready to answer the question of *what a biblical text means*. Since the text is a communication from an author to an audience, our first question is always, What did this passage mean to its author and the first readers? After all, this author was the one who put these words together to convey a meaning to someone. Determining what the ancient author originally meant is not always easy because this text was composed centuries ago in a culture and language that were very different from...
ours. But we can always find help from scholars who know a lot more about history and the Bible than we do. In the next chapter, we will explore in more detail some of the ways that scripture scholars can help us deal with some of the problems of language, history and culture that arise in our reading.

“It’s not what I don’t understand in the Bible that bothers me—but what I do understand.”

—MARK TWAIN (d. 1910)

We also notice the problem of saying and meaning in the story of Phillip and the Ethiopian, who can easily grasp what the words of Isaiah say, but not what they mean. Without some indication of their context—what the words are referring to—the words are confusing and puzzling. At this moment, through the direction of the Holy Spirit, the deacon Philip comes alongside the chariot. He asks whether the Ethiopian understands the meaning of what he is reading. The Ethiopian responds in words that express our need too: “How can I, unless someone instructs me?” (Acts 8:31, NABRE).

The Ethiopian assumes there is some meaning here that is eluding him (this reveals his assumption in approaching this text that it has some deeper religious meaning for him). But he cannot determine what it is because he does not know to whom the words refer. He lacks the proper context that is required to furnish the meaning of the apparently plain words. But notice that he also realizes that discovering that meaning demands asking first what the author was trying to communicate—“I beg you, about whom is the prophet saying this?” (Acts 8:34, NABRE). The Ethiopian knows that reading for meaning first hinges on knowing what the author was trying to say to the original audience.

Supplying this context of the original author is not something we can always do easily on our own. So the Ethiopian welcomes the help of Philip’s more specialized knowledge to supply this meaning, which emerges when Philip puts this particular passage into the wider context of salvation history. The text becomes a springboard for Philip’s proclamation of Jesus as the fulfillment of this “suffering servant” described by Isaiah (see 52:13—53:12).

Like the Ethiopian, we also often need some help from scripture scholars to discover what the text meant for the original author and audience. The
footnotes in our Bible usually give us this kind of information and commentaries aid us when we have further questions. Once we have a sense of what the text meant to its author and its first readers, we can connect that meaning to similar situations and needs in our own life.

**Connecting the Text: Applying It to Life**

Reading changes us. When we make a text our own, we are changed by what we discover. Books have different effects on us. Sometimes we read a novel and enjoy the story and then never think of it again. But some books and their meanings become important to us. We make them our own when we let their characters become our models, their ideas shape our ideas, their values become ours and their imperatives guide our actions.

The connection between the biblical text and our life can take a variety of forms. Since the guiding assumptions and the interests chosen for reading it can be so varied, so will the applications. If, for example, we are expecting the Bible to supply us with a blueprint for our day, then the connections we make will need to be rather complex and highly artificial. If we want the Bible to provide some insight into what it means to be a Christian in an apparently uncaring or increasingly hostile world, then our connecting points will be easier to discover and more practical.

“In the presence of God, during a recollected reading of the text, it is good to ask, for example: Lord, what does this text say to me? What is it about my life that you want to change by this text? What troubles me about this text? Why am I not interested in this? Or perhaps: What do I find pleasant in this text? What is it about this word that moves me? What attracts me? Why does it attract me?”

—POPE FRANCIS  
*The Joy of the Gospel*, #153  
(November 24, 2013)

Since we can connect with the text at any point and in any way, we need to narrow our focus in order to gain a specific benefit from our reading. One way to do this is to focus on either the people or the story. If we **focus on the people**, then we look for how their ideas, feelings, values and behavior might relate to our own. Every person we encounter in the Bible is in some way
like us. The root of the similarity is that both they and we are involved in a relationship with God. Their examples of how they worked out the details of living that relationship provide some clues for how we can do it too.

So when we read about the Ethiopian, we can connect his example as a seeker with our own search. We are encouraged to seek and find just as he did, to read with perseverance when difficulties arise, to look for help when needed, to share our learning with others and to respond generously when we discover the God who speaks through the words of the text.

If we focus on the story, then we seek connecting points between the biblical story and our life story. The Bible is the story of people in relationship to God. The relationship moves through a well-defined pattern of invitation and call, hearing and response, faith commitment and covenant, community and shared responsibility to build the relationship, challenges of meeting obligations and changing ourselves and our communities because of the relationship and finally accepting the cost of maintaining the relationship. Where are we in this dynamic process of a relationship with God? What challenges and demands does the biblical text open to us? How does the text help us live more fully our relationship with God?

In the story of the Ethiopian, we discover the path that he follows into a deeper relationship with God through his Scripture reading. The journey begins with his desire to read the Bible. It continues with his searching out not only what the words say but also what they meant to their original author. It includes his willingness to rely on help from others and to share his search with them, and it finally culminates with his fearlessly changing his life because of what he read and desiring baptism. His journey is our journey too.

As we read the Bible more often and in many different circumstances, we discover that there is never just one meaning for any text. Likewise there is never just one application to our lives. As the situations in which we read the Bible change, so will our applications. Although the words of the text remain the same because fixed on the page, their meaning and significance for today changes with our needs and interests as readers and with the circumstances in which we read them. This is why the Bible will continue to be read and interpreted anew throughout the lifetime of the Church. It will take the lifetime of the Church to plumb the depths of the meaning of God’s revelation.
As We Work on God’s Word, It Works on Us

As we use the ABC method to read the Bible for its meanings, we will notice that interpreting God’s Word is not a one-sided process. God’s Word is “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12). Since God’s Word is part of the communication of a relationship, it becomes part of a conversation that involves a give and take by which we are changed and transformed.

When we approach the Bible text, at the same time God is approaching us through that text. As we break open the meaning of the text, God breaks us open through the Word so that we can be transformed. And as we connect the text to our life, God connects to us more closely through the words that we read. In short, as we work on God’s Word, God’s Word works on us.

For our reading journey through the Bible, besides understanding the information or message of the biblical books, we also need to use this information to live a better Christian life. As with the Ethiopian, merely gaining an intellectual insight is never the end of Bible reading. When he discovers the meaning of the passage of Isaiah and its relation to Christ, he moves from information and insight to application and action. So likewise our Bible reading is never simply for information but for the formation of ourselves as Christians. All of our reading is for living better lives, and reading the Bible is for living better in our relationship with God.

Questions for Reflection and Group Discussion

1. Share an example from your life of someone’s meaning changing when his or her words were taken out of their original context.
2. Why is the identification of the type of writing, or genre, of a biblical text so important in reading?
3. In your approach to the Bible, what questions, concerns or needs most prompt your search?
4. Why is the question of the meaning for the original author and first readers of a text so important?
5. How come there can be so many different applications of a Bible text?
chapter eleven

How Scripture Scholars Can Help You Read

Using the ABC method for reading and interpreting the Bible equips us to become more competent readers of the biblical texts. However, it does not eliminate all the problems that we face as readers. Since reading is a communication between an author and an audience through a text, we must be sensitive to the problems that can arise in this communication process.

Contexts of Meaning: The Three Worlds of the Text

The three elements of author, audience and text remind us that successful communication always joins three distinct worlds of meaning: the world of the author behind the text, the world within the text itself, and the world of the reader who is facing the text. When these worlds or their relationships change, so do the meanings of the text.

THE THREE WORLDS OF THE TEXT

1. The world behind the text. This is the world shared by the author and the original audience: the historical, social and cultural situation in which the author composed the text as a response to some particular problem or need of the audience.

2. The world within the text. This is the world described and portrayed within the text itself. This world can be self-contained, but normally we connect this world with our own world in order to apply its meaning to our own situation.

3. The world facing the text. This is the present situation of the person who is reading the text. Since a text endures through time once it is written down, this world always changes with each historical situation of the later readers.
"Interpretation of the Bible is never unproblematic. It has never been so, not from the beginning. And those who think it is clear and unambiguous mostly are unaware of the issues, and unaware of the interpretive moves they themselves are making. Indeed, ‘they know not what they do.’ The problem is that at the same time the Bible is a complicated reflective literature fashioned in and valued in various contexts, and a singular norm of life and faith in several communities of faith.”

—WALTER BRUEGGEMANN


For the Old Testament, this world behind the text is that of the Hebrew people during the roughly fifteen hundred years before Christ. Such a long period of history reveals many different social, political and religious situations in which the various biblical books were composed and written. Knowing the general framework of this historical development is helpful for situating the various books in their proper social and historical contexts.

For the New Testament, the books and letters are situated in the first-century Mediterranean world. They describe various situations in the Hellenistic Roman world, especially in the areas of Palestine, Syria, Asia Minor (present-day Turkey), Greece and Rome. Some authors give important clues
about their location and their audience, as does Paul in his letters and John in the opening chapter of the book of Revelation. For other authors, scholars must carefully analyze their texts to tease out clues that inform us about the original historical situations.


**The World Within the Text**

Texts create worlds of meaning. When we read them, they invite us to enter into those worlds. Biblical texts also create worlds of meaning and when we step inside we are confronted by people, settings and theological claims that are often strange and always challenging. Readers discover these textual worlds by a careful and critical reading of the text itself—regardless (at least at first!) of any information about the author or the original situation in which the text was composed. We are most familiar with story worlds from reading novels, in particular historical sagas or science fiction in which the story world describes a situation that is different from ours or the author’s.

> “Each of us constantly seeks to imagine the world, and the self and others within it, in such a way as to enable us to engage in coherent and intelligible speech, valuable and effective action.”

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JAMES BOYD WHITE

*The Edge of Meaning* (2003)

The textual world of the Old Testament book of Exodus, for example, is set in Egypt, very likely in the thirteenth century before Christ. The story describes the conflict between God’s agent Moses and the Pharaoh, which leads to the liberation of the oppressed Hebrews from their bondage. Although the biblical book that we have was written down long after the events, the story world in the text retains its integrity because everything in it fits together.

The textual world of the gospels is that of Jesus’ life during the first third of the first century. The story takes place mostly in the Jewish homeland in
Galilee, Judea and Jerusalem around the years AD 27–30. This story world is not the same as the historical world of the four authors who wrote forty to sixty years later in different circumstances and locations. Yet the story world of Jesus is consistent and coherent for a reader approaching the text.

Investigating the world within the text utilizes all our familiar skills of reading. Although literary scholars have developed many very sophisticated techniques for appreciating the intricacies of textual communication, a simple method for exploring a text is to ask some basic questions:

- What kind of writing is this (its form)?
- How does the writing fit together (its structure)?
- Who is doing what, where, when and why (its story)?

These questions lead to an initial appreciation of the message (content) that the text communicates.


**The World Facing the Text**

This is the world of the reader or audience. Because a text becomes fixed and permanent through writing, it is available to other audiences besides those in the immediate community for whom it was originally composed. Thus the world of the reader shifts constantly as the text is read in many different historical, social and cultural circumstances.

“The Holy Spirit has generously and advantageously planned Holy Scripture in such a way that in the easier passages he relieves our hunger; in the ones that are harder to understand he drives away our pride.”

—ST. AUGUSTINE (d. 430)
*On Christian Doctrine*, II. 6

When we read the Bible now, almost nineteen hundred years after its last books were written, like the original audiences, we are still reading for clues about who God is and for cues about how to respond to our own experience.
of God’s transforming presence. But the world in front of the text is now our own everyday reality, along with the various modern presuppositions and expectations that we naturally bring to our reading.

Reading for meaning connects the three worlds of the author, the audience and the text. A satisfactory interpretation of any text demands some attention to each of these three worlds and to the relationships between them. Neglecting one of these worlds or failing to bridge the gaps that can arise between them skews our interpretation and assures that our understanding will be incomplete.

Problems of Disconnected Worlds

In general, interpretation usually becomes difficult for conscientious Bible readers because gaps develop that separate one or another of the three worlds that were originally so closely connected at the time of composition. This is especially true since for most of us the Bible is the only ancient text that we read. Scholars are ever hard at work devising ways to overcome these gaps.
The Language Gap

The language gap occurs because of the difference between the original language of the author and that of readers today. Since few of us read Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek, we rely on the increased understanding of ancient languages and more sophisticated methods of translation employed by textual scholars and linguists who provide us with careful and critical modern translations of the biblical texts. This gap is primarily overcome by using one of the excellent modern translations that we discussed earlier in chapter 8.


The Historical Gap

Once a text is written down, it takes on a life of its own. Later readers read it in historical situations that are different from that of the first readers, which can obscure the author’s original intent in writing the text and the meaning actually expressed through the words. Throughout history, Christians have continued to read the Bible because they believed that these sacred texts remained as trustworthy guides for leading a Christian life. So today we believe the Bible’s importance is not limited to the first Christians as they worked out their faith and relationships but still applies to our lives today.

“In the Scriptures, the words are not simple, as some people think. There are very many hidden meanings in them.”
—ST. JEROME (d. 420)
Commentary on the Vocation of Isaiah

The historical gap between the past and the present arises from this difference between the original situation and that of the present reader. When the text was first written, the author and readers shared the same situation. The world behind the text and the world facing the text were so close that connecting them was not too complicated. Knowing what the author meant was easier because they already shared so much about their everyday world. But
when the world of the author and the world of the audience become more disconnected, readers need more sophisticated strategies to figure out what the author meant when the text was composed.

Most critical biblical scholarship for the last century and a half has been guided by this quest to discover the original meaning of the text—what it meant to the author and the original audience for which it was intended. But since the world of the original biblical author and audience was so different from our own, biblical scholars have had to devise a general method of interpreting texts that recognizes this historical and cultural difference and tries to overcome it.

This method of interpretation is called the historical-critical method. It is *historical* because it first attempts to understand the meaning of ancient texts in their original context (the historical, social and literary situations in which they originated). It is *critical* (from the Greek word for *making judgments*) because it also compares and analyzes in order to arrive at historical and literary judgments about the results of the study.

The historical-critical method is primarily concerned with interpreting texts, especially ancient ones. It is based on the principle that any adequate reading requires attention both to historical issues—who (the author) addresses whom (the audience) in what circumstances (the original situation)—and also to literary criticism issues—in what way (form) with what message (content) for what reason (function). These basic questions structure the historical-critical method and contribute to its primary goal of learning what the text meant to its author and first readers.


**The Cultural Gap**

Reading ancient texts, in particular those like the Bible that are also sacred, challenges us in many ways. The differences between the ancient world of the author and the original readers and our own world are not immediately
apparent to us. The social and cultural world of those ancient people is like a strange country, where life is organized differently. Unless we gain some knowledge about their world, we can never hope to understand what they understood and were trying to communicate.

Our world is vastly different from the New Testament world of two thousand years ago and even further removed from the Old Testament world of Judaism. The danger for readers today is that we tend to confuse our world with these ancient worlds. For example, when we read the word marriage, we need to know that for ancient Jews such as Abraham and Moses, and even for Jesus and Paul, this word pointed to a social and cultural practice that was very different from our modern American idea of marriage. The discrepancy arises particularly from the completely different social and cultural worldviews that characterize ancient Mediterraneans and modern Americans.

For centuries, Bible readers shared the assumption that the world behind the text and their world as readers (especially up to the 1800s) were the same. This is illustrated by how medieval artists depicted ancient persons such as Jesus or Mary dressed in the same medieval clothing as the artists wore. Because readers assumed they shared the same world of the biblical authors, they did not think they needed any special historical procedures for examining the world behind the text. The danger for us readers today is that, unless we recognize the strangeness of the biblical world, we tend to identify our mentalities and concerns with theirs and think that our solutions to problems would be just like theirs. Reading for the meaning of an ancient text requires us to bridge the gap between the ancient world and our own.

Scholars try to close this gap by becoming more acutely aware of how the culture of the ancient Jews or that of the early Christians functioned. Scholars have been buoyed by the success of anthropological and social science models to become more aware of the cultural meanings that the original author and audience shared.

In order to appreciate the social and cultural difference between the biblical world and ours today, see Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, Social World of Ancient Israel 1250–587 B.C.E. (Baker Academic, 2005) or Joel B. Green & Lee Martin McDonald, The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social and Historical Contexts (Baker Academic, 2013).
The Hermeneutic Gap

A common problem that produces anxiety for many readers is the conflict of interpretations that occurs when different readers read the same text in different ways. We overcome this gap by developing a clearer understanding of interpretation theory (called hermeneutics). Since we have usually been conditioned to assume that there can be only one meaning for Scripture, we are unsettled when others, especially those within our own faith communities, interpret the Bible differently from us. Since the text is the same for all, different interpretations must be traced either to the personal differences of the readers or to the different ways or methods of reading the text.

“In the divine Scriptures, every word, every syllable, accent and point is packed with meaning.”

—ST. IRENAEUS OF LYONS (d. 202)
Commentary on Ephesians

The first source accounting for different interpretations is the differences in readers themselves. Not only do readers have different abilities and reading skills but they also make personal choices about what they want to discover in the text. Some people use the Bible as a source for history, archaeology, psychology or comparative literature. These different interests and concerns lead the inquirers to highlight certain features of the biblical text rather than others. Problems arise when they confuse their particular interest with what the author intended or assume that what they have discovered is all there is to discover about this particular text.

The second source of conflicting interpretations is based on different theories of interpretation. The most obvious difference is between those who insist that the author’s originally intended meaning should guide the interpretation and those who do not. For the former, the historical-critical method becomes the principal method of interpretation. For the latter, the meaning of the text is considered to be plain and clear simply upon reading it.

Because this latter approach seldom acknowledges the significance of the gap between the world behind the text and our own, it considers the historical-critical method unnecessary. These readers claim to find a close
This is an excerpt from the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993):

“Fundamentalist interpretation starts from the principle that the Bible, being the Word of God, inspired and free from error, should be read and interpreted literally in all its details. But by ‘literal interpretation’ it understands a naively literalist interpretation, one, that is to say, which excludes every effort at understanding the Bible that takes account of its historical origins and development. It is opposed, therefore, to the use of the historical-critical method, as indeed to the use of any other scientific method for the interpretation of Scripture.

Fundamentalism is right to insist on the divine inspiration of the Bible, the inerrancy of the Word of God and other biblical truths included in its five fundamental points. But its way of presenting these truths is rooted in an ideology which is not biblical, whatever the proponents of this approach might say. For it demands an unshakable adherence to rigid doctrinal points of view and imposes, as the only source of teaching for Christian life and salvation, a reading of the Bible which rejects all questioning and any kind of critical research.”

Here are some of the problems of fundamentalist interpretation:

*It refuses to accept the historical character of biblical revelation.* It does not admit that the inspired Word of God has been expressed in human language by human authors possessed of limited capacities and resources. Thus, the reader

- treats the biblical text as if it had been dictated word-for-word by the Spirit
- fails to recognize that the Bible was formulated in language conditioned by various times.

and obvious connection between what the text says and what it appears to mean. This plain meaning is, however, too often a modern meaning imposed upon the ancient text. The original meaning of the author is confused with whatever meaning is perceived by a reader who simply picks up the Bible and reads what its words say. Whatever one understands from the text is assumed to be the divinely inspired meaning. But we must remember that the inspired meaning is not the one we personally read into it but the one that the original author intended when writing it. Discovering this meaning is very difficult today without using the historical-critical method.
It pays no attention to the literary norms and human ways of thinking in the biblical texts. Many of these norms are the result of a long process covering diverse historical situations.

It unduly stresses the inerrancy of certain details in the biblical texts, especially in what concerns historical events or supposedly scientific truth. Thus, the reader

- often historicizes material that, from the start, never claimed to be historical
- considers historical everything reported or recounted with verbs in the past tense, failing to take account of the possibility of symbolic or figurative meaning.

It does not consider the development of the gospel tradition. It naively confuses the final stage (what evangelists wrote) with the initial stage (the words and deeds of Jesus).

It tends to adopt very narrow points of view. Thus, the reader

- accepts the literal reality of an ancient, out-of-date cosmology, simply because it is found in the Bible
- relies on a noncritical reading of certain texts of the Bible to reinforce political ideas and social attitudes marked by prejudices (such as racism) contrary to the gospel.

Its attachment to the principle “Scripture alone” produces an anti-Church attitude. Thus, the reader

- separates the interpretation of the Bible from Christian Church tradition
- fails to realize that the New Testament took form within the Christian Church, whose existence preceded the composition of the texts
- gives little importance to the creeds, doctrines and liturgical practices of the Church tradition, as well as to the Church’s teaching function (Magisterium)
- accepts the fundamentalist approach as a form of private interpretation, which does not acknowledge that the Church is founded on the Bible and draws its life and inspiration from Scripture.

Reading the Bible without the historical-critical method is like taking a journey with an out-of-date map. Even if you follow it correctly, you still get lost! As confusion sets in, finding your way becomes more difficult because your map pictures a reality that no longer exists. Errors multiply because your assumptions about the validity of the map are misplaced. So if the gap between the biblical writers’ worlds and ours is not bridged by the historical-critical method, errors multiply because our assumptions about reading the Bible are no longer appropriate or adequate for guiding our journey today.

If you wish to find out more about these issues of interpretation, see Fr. Raymond E. Brown, 101 Questions and Answers on the Bible (Paulist Press,
No Magic Solutions: Only Hard Work Helps

The Bible can be read and interpreted in many ways for many reasons. All of these different readings are necessary to fathom the depths of its meaning and discover its application to our lives. But we must always pay attention first to the meaning that the authors intended. Since this is the meaning inspired by God, we must use every resource we can to understand it.

The Bible is not only God’s Word but also the Church’s book. There was revelation before the Bible was written, and God’s self-revelation to us today is not limited to the pages of the Bible. The Bible is one special way in which God comes to meet us. What we get out of it will depend on how attentive, careful and skillful we are at discovering what it contains.

As a book, the biblical revelation must be read and interpreted through our human efforts. It does not work magically, without our effort, nor does it give us all the answers for every problem we face. But it does reveal the God who invites us into a relationship and leads us deeper into that relationship. Our challenge as readers is to bring the Bible to life.

Questions for Reflection and Group Discussion

1. Describe the three worlds of the text for Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. What difficulties do we have in understanding Lincoln’s meaning?
2. Why is the original situation of any communication so important for determining its meaning?
3. When we apply the New Testament message to our lives, what problems can emerge if we do not understand the difference between our social and cultural world and the social and cultural world of Jesus?
4. What does it mean to say that the past is not just prior to us but a different mental and cultural experience? How does this affect our understanding of Jesus and his message?
5. Why is there never just one meaning for any biblical text?
In his second letter to the Christian communities in Corinth, Paul reminds them that “the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Corinthians 3:6). This saying reveals the outlook of a predominantly oral culture in which few people could read and all reading was done out loud rather than silently to oneself. Writing was a mystery because the strange markings on the papyrus seemed to solidify spoken words in ink on the page. These words could then remain intact, like an entombed body, and later be brought to life whenever someone read them out loud.

Recall also that in the Hebrew language only consonants were written down, so determining the meaning of a word, phrase or sentence required supplying the right vowels when reading aloud. As Paul noted, the words on the page were dead until someone breathed life into them by reading them out loud. Reading, then, was a process of bringing the words to life.

“What other life can there be without knowledge of the Scriptures, for through these Christ himself, who is the life of the faithful, becomes known.”

—ST. JEROME (d. 420)
Letter 30

Our biblical reading journey is such a process. The printed Bible just lies there on our bookshelf or on our nightstand, its words dead and its meanings inanimate until we open it up and vivify them. Reading the Bible is a way of bringing God’s Word to life. When we read it, we first bring the words to life by transferring their meaning from the inked page into ideas in our mind.

We bring God’s Word to life in another way when we translate the ideas into action. Our reading is never complete until we bring God’s words to our
life situation. Our goal is to bring God’s Word to life, not merely to read and study it. In step three of the ABC method, we connect the biblical meanings to our life. We bring these meanings to bear on the circumstances of our life and let ourselves, our situations and our world be changed by what we read. Thus God’s Word again becomes “living and active” (Hebrews 4:12).

“Learning to read the gospel, and to connect it to one’s life, is a central activity in the Christian life, from beginning to end. It is in a sense the foundation of the entire Church, for this is where we hear of Jesus of Nazareth, of his conversations with his disciples and others, of his life, death, and resurrection. We never stop trying to tune ourselves to the gospel, to learn from it. This is a challenge for a whole life.”

—James Boyd White

Connecting to the Gospel (2010)

The Emmaus Journey: A Model for Our Bible Pilgrimage

When we bring the biblical word to life first in our minds and then in our actions, our journey becomes not just a geographical journey but also a pilgrimage. A pilgrimage is a journey to a sacred place. But the outward, physical journey is accompanied by an inner, spiritual journey to the center of our faith. On a pilgrimage, we reach the sacred destination and simultaneously meet the God whose presence makes the location sacred. So with our Bible journey, we move through the Bible’s pages in order to come face-to-face with the God who speaks to us through these words. The final destination of our Bible journey is not to get to a place but to meet a person, not intellectual comprehension but interpersonal communion.

“The best guide you can find to the correct spiritual path is the serious study of the Bible. Each person can concentrate on the area where they feel themselves to be lacking and find, as in a hospital, a cure for their particular trouble.”

—St. Basil the Great (d. 379)

In chapter 24 of his Gospel, Luke provides a captivating image of what our biblical journey is like. On the first Easter, two disciples, profoundly
disappointed because the tomb is empty and Jesus’ body is gone, have concluded that their buoyant hopes about Jesus were sadly misplaced. So they begin their gloomy journey away from Jerusalem toward home.

On the way, they meet a stranger who walks with them. Since Luke tells us that this mysterious stranger is really the risen Jesus, we readers understand the conversation differently from the way the two disciples do. As they walk along discussing the meaning of Scripture, the stranger explains how everything pointed to a messiah who would suffer. The disciples invite the stranger to eat with them, and suddenly “in the breaking of the bread” (Luke 24:35) they recognize the stranger as the risen Jesus. When Christ vanishes, they rush back to Jerusalem to share their good news with the other disciples.

“The Bible tells us not how we should talk with God, but what God says to us.”
—KARL BARTH (d. 1968)
Swiss Theologian

In this wonderful story, Luke provides a vivid example of the journey of our Christian lives. Like these two disciples, as we go along our way, Jesus meets and accompanies us even though we don’t always recognize him. Through our reading and exploring of the meaning of Scripture, we become aware of God’s plan for salvation through Jesus’ death and resurrection. We also recognize Christ’s presence in our eucharistic meal, and strangers vanish as we all become one in Christ. These disciples are a mirror for our lives.

As we read this excerpt carefully, we notice that Luke also outlines the stages in the progression of our Bible reading journey. As these disciples walk with Jesus, their journey moves through the following stages.

**From Co- Presence to Conversation**

After the stranger begins to accompany them, he poses a question that redirects their attention and engages them in a new conversation. “What are you discussing?” This invitation to dialogue is eagerly accepted. The disciples launch into a description not only of the facts about the recent events of Jesus’ prophetic ministry and death but also about their interpretation or meaning. “We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.”
But note that these hopes have been dashed. The disciples speak of all this in the past tense. It’s done, over, finished. All the bad news about Jesus’ murder, his corpse missing from the empty tomb and the unsubstantiated report that he is alive have not yet become “good news.” Jesus’ life is not yet a “gospel life” but just another life in which the powers of death have triumphed. Words about Jesus are no substitute for an experience of him as the risen Christ. Nor can words alone convince them that he is really risen.

**From Conversation to Companionship**

At this point the stranger begins a revisionist reading of their Scriptures. Like the Ethiopian, the disciples know the words but not the proper context in which to understand their deeper meaning. Everything they have told the stranger about Jesus is correct, but they lack the essential insight that the promised redeemer would triumph through weakness and suffering instead of through military and miraculous power. So Jesus reinterprets the whole of Scripture in the light of his own suffering.

> “Thanks be to the gospel, by means of which we also, who did not see Christ when he came into this world, seem to be with him when we read his deeds.”
> —ST. AMBROSE (d. 397)
> Concerning Widows, 62

By now, the day is getting on and they have been enjoying the conversation with the stranger so much that they ask him to stay and eat with them. The mysterious stranger is invited to be a companion and share their meal.

**From Companionship to Co-Mission**

As they celebrate their developing relationship, the stranger “took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them” (Luke 24:30). We do not know exactly what triggered the recognition, but their eyes are opened and they realize the stranger is the risen Christ. But as soon as they recognize him, he vanishes from their sight. Immediately, they want to share this experience with others. Their companionship is transformed into a co-mission to share their good news with others. So they rush back to Jerusalem to tell the other disciples.
From Co-Mission to Community

When they get back, eager to share their good news, they cannot get a word in. The other disciples blurt out first that Jesus has appeared to them. As so many missionaries discover when they eagerly bring the news of God’s presence to others, God has already been there first! But they do share their own version of the good news. Their mutual sharing forms the community of those who have experienced the risen Christ in their lives. Their common experience of Christ now bonds them into the Christian community.

Bringing the biblical words to life is often aided by sharing what we are discovering. As the story of Philip and the Ethiopian also illustrated, difficulties are easier to overcome when we share them instead of struggling with them alone. And a shared journey is nearly always more enjoyable than one we make alone. Finding companions for our biblical journey makes our trip more pleasant. The word companion comes from the word that means “share bread with us.” For us Christians, the great sharing of bread is our celebration of Eucharist. Just as the Eucharist is our primary model for sharing the Christian life, so its pattern can also be a model for sharing the biblical word with one another.

A Eucharistic Model for Scripture Sharing

As a eucharistic people, our Christian lives are stamped by how Jesus gives himself again and again in the form of bread and wine as nourishment for our lives. The fourfold pattern that characterizes our eucharistic response is rooted in Jesus’ own actions: “He took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them” (Luke 24:30).

“All spiritual growth comes from reading and reflection. By reading we learn what we did not know; by reflection we retain what we have learned.”

—ST. ISIDORE OF SEVILLE (d. 636)

This dynamic pattern of the Eucharist—take, bless, break, share—also provides the pattern for sharing our biblical journey. These four actions constitute the four steps for our Bible sharing. They guide us to take up the
Bible, to bless God and expect a communication for our own lives, to break the biblical books into manageable meanings and to share our understanding of God’s saving message with others.

**He Took Bread**

Just as Jesus took the physical bread, so we must take up the Bible. Nothing happens until we do. The meanings remain locked up within its covers, inert and useless for our lives. Food on the supermarket shelves looks great and promises nourishment, but it does nothing for us until we buy it, prepare it and eat it. The same is true of the Bible.

Although there are many helpful books about the Scriptures, they are no substitute for the real thing. No amount of knowledge about the Bible can substitute for the experience of reading the Bible itself. By reading the Bible we become familiar with God’s personality and the ways in which God prefers to relate to us. When we actually read the Scriptures, we do more than read words; we encounter a person through that person’s self-revelation. So taking up the Bible is different from taking up any other book.

**He Blessed**

Blessing is a biblical idea that needs some explanation. For the ancients, blessing described God’s everyday care for us. Besides the spectacular events through which the people learned that God cared for them—creation, the exodus, the giving of the land, the restoration after the exile—there were the ordinary events that also showed God’s loving providence. The everyday experiences of the divine gifts of health, wealth, children, family, friends, good weather, abundant harvests and all the little things that make our lives satisfying and enjoyable were recognized as God’s blessings.

Through these divine blessings, we live long and happy lives. Since we cannot produce any of these blessings ourselves but must depend on God alone to give them, when we bless we do not cause these blessings to happen but ask God to give them. When Jesus blesses bread, he is asking God to communicate life to us through the bread. This is the spiritual life—God’s own life in us—which our material food cannot give.
Just as God communicates life to us through the bread that is Jesus, so God also imparts life to us through the words of the Bible. Through our reading, our eyes are opened to recognize the blessings God has given in the past and continues to give in the present. Whenever we read and reflect upon the meaning of the Bible, we can ask God to empower us to make our everyday lives better. We use the Scriptures to discover clues about God’s hidden presence in our midst. Our Bible reading also makes us more familiar with God’s favorite ways of entering into everyday situations to bless them.

**He Broke**

Bread is no good for nourishment unless it is broken, chewed, digested and transformed into the nutrients our body can use. Likewise, the bread of God’s Word is no good for our spiritual nourishment unless we break it down into meanings that help us to live better Christian lives.

“Through this bread there comes about what we see in the gospel: a fellowship of pilgrims, a fellowship gathered around the apostles, a fellowship of a meal that includes everyone, a fellowship of one single pilgrim path to God.”

—KARL RAHNER, S.J.

*Biblical Homilies* (1967)

The process of breaking a text down into intelligible meanings is interpretation, that is, understanding not only what the text says but also what it means. In step two of our ABC method, when we move beyond the simple reading of the words of the Bible “to understand what God has wished to communicate to us, [we] must carefully investigate what meaning the biblical writers actually had in mind; that will also be what God chose to manifest through their words” (Vatican II, *On Revelation*, #12).

After we discover what the Bible meant to its original audience, we can then determine what it means for us today. We study the Bible because we believe that God’s revealed Word communicates a message that still applies today. God is always working in our world to transform it into the world God wants it to be. Through reading and interpreting the Bible, we detect God’s presence and discover God’s vision for a transformed world.
He Shared

We humans are not the only animals that eat, but we are the only ones who cook! And much of our cooking is not merely for sustenance but for showing others that we care for them. Food always means more to us than biological nourishment. It also communicates many symbolic meanings that reveal our social and cultural values.

Eating alone is not much fun. Sharing food signifies our willingness to share our lives. So we tend to be very selective about the people we dine with. We share bread with the people we want to share our lives. Jesus’ inclusive dining was a sign of his universal love. Just as Christ was willing to share himself with anyone who wanted or needed his company, so we Christians must learn to share ourselves with others.

The word of the Bible, like the bread that is Jesus, is for everyone. Our discovery of God through the Bible is an experience that we are expected to share with others. Meanings cannot exist in isolation. Meaning is shared when we speak it. Speaking expresses (pushes out!) our inner experience into the shared realm of public language. Others now hear our words and are expected to respond. So dialogue begins.

Using the Eucharistic Model for Small Group Sharing

The four steps in the eucharistic process also provide a model for the practice of small-group Bible sharing. As the group gathers in a circle, the Bible is reverently placed in the center of the group. A candle can be lighted to remind us that Christ our light is present to guide our path through Scripture.

“If on any day there is no instruction [in the Christian gathering], let each one at home take the Scriptures and read sufficiently in passages that they find profitable.”

—ST. HIPPOLYTUS OF ROME (d. 235)
Apostolic Traditions, 36

One of the group members then takes the book and slowly reads the passage chosen for prayer and discussion. At the end of the reading, after time for reflection, one member prays for God to bless the group with the
SOME BASIC QUESTIONS FOR EXPLORING ANY SCRIPTURE PASSAGE

There are four basic questions and several follow-up questions that you can use to explore any biblical reading to stimulate individual reflection or small group discussion. (Note that not all of these questions are equally answered in every passage.)

1. **What does this text tell me about God? about Jesus? about the Holy Spirit?**
   - Does this confirm what I already know?
   - Is there something new here that I had not noticed before?
   - What does God want me to know or do?

2. **What does God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit do in relation to us and our world?**
   - How is the divine presence and power revealed?
   - Why does God come to us at this time and in this way?
   - What is required of us to do or not to do in response?

3. **What does this text tell me about myself?**
   - How am I like the persons in this scripture passage?
   - How would I respond if this happened to me?
   - How would I be changed if I did what the text says?
   - What surprised me the most about this passage?
   - What puzzled me the most?
   - What challenged me the most to live out my faith more fully?
   - What made me most comfortable? Why?
   - What made me most uncomfortable? Why?

4. **What does this text tell me about the community that God desires?**
   - What does this text tell me about how to love God?
   - What does this text tell me about how to love others?
   - What guidelines for better community living does the passage offer?

Presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit to open their minds and hearts to hear, heed and apply God’s message to their lives.

After a time of prayerful reflection in silence, the group begins to break the passage into its meanings. After rereading the passage, they first consider what the author said and what the passage meant to its first readers. This can be done simply by considering who said what, to whom, in what situation, in
what way, for what reasons. Then they consider what this text means now as they make connections between it and their lives during the coming week.

Then they share these reflections with one another in the group. After this conversation, the group session ends with a song, a prayer and the commissioning of the members to find ways to share what they have heard and learned with their family, friends, co-workers and others with whom they will come into contact until the next gathering.

In this way, God’s Word is like the bread and wine of the Eucharist. When we take, bless, break, and share God’s Word, we are simultaneously taken, blessed, broken and shared by God’s mysterious and loving presence. We are taken into the community of sisters and brothers who are identified as Christians because we are being formed in the image of Jesus. His story becomes our story; his example becomes our guide for living; his vision and values become our guidelines for consecrating and reordering the world.

**Your Bible Journey**

As you end this book and prepare to embark on your Bible journey, the Emmaus journey illustrates what awaits you. When you begin, you invite the mysterious presence of God to accompany you. The words of the Bible begin a conversation. As you read God’s words, you begin to realize that maybe a lot of what you thought was so clear, especially your presuppositions about God and God’s plan and about Jesus and his message, need to be revised in the light of your discovery of new meanings. Your dialogue with the text, both through the questions you ask it and the even more the challenging questions it asks you, gradually transforms you. As you journey with the Bible, it subtly refocuses your attention and redescribes your understanding of the events of your world and their meaning in relation to Christ.

As your relationship grows as you progress on your journey, you also move from conversation to companionship and sharing in the community’s eucharistic meal. You imitate the eucharistic actions of Jesus, discovering him present once again in the bread and wine that you share at communion time. As with the Emmaus disciples, this meal is the culminating moment when you recognize him “in the breaking of the bread” (Luke 24:35).
But with Jesus, companionship and meal sharing are never the final experience. We also call the Eucharist the Mass, which comes from the Latin words of dismissal—*Ita, Missa est* (“Go, you are sent forth”). We gather together to be nourished in order to take up our mission. We continue in our lives the task of sharing the good news of Jesus’ rising to new life. Your companionship gives way to co-mission, and this leads to the creation and maintenance of the Christian community that gathers to celebrate God’s mysterious transforming presence in word and sacrament.

“What, pray, can be more sacred than this sacred mystery (of the Holy Scriptures)? What can be more delightful than the pleasure found in them? What food, what honey can be sweeter than to learn of God’s wise plan, to enter into God’s sanctuary and gaze upon the mind of the creator, and to rehearse the words of your Lord, which, though derided by the wise of this world, are really full of spiritual wisdom!”

—ST. JEROME (d. 420)
Letter 30

So enjoy your journey with the mysterious stranger who is now already walking with you. Discover God the same way that these Emmaus seekers did. Be attentive to the moments when the words that you thought you knew so well suddenly break open to reveal unsuspected surprises.

Just as Jesus was recognized on the Emmaus journey when questions turned into conversation, when conversation sparked companionship and when recognition of a mysterious companion kindled evangelization, so will he again be recognized this way on your personal Bible reading journey. And my fondest hope for you is that you will be able to say, like those Emmaus pilgrims when their journey was done:

“*Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the way, while he was opening the scriptures to us?*”

**A Glossary of Biblical Terms**

**apocalyptic.** (Greek: to reveal) A modern, scholarly label for the Jewish and Christian attitude and writings that eagerly anticipate and imagine God’s imminent intervention into our history first to judge and then transform it.

**Apocrypha.** (Greek: hidden things) An ancient Jewish or Christian book that is not included in the community’s official biblical canon of books (thus also identified as non-canonical). Such writings can be described as apocryphal.

**Aramaic.** The Semitic language related to Hebrew, widely used after about 300 BC, which was spoken by Jesus, his disciples and the apostle Paul.

**canon.** (Greek: a measuring ruler) The official list of books that belong to the biblical collection of a community. Such books are called canonical.

**captivity epistles.** Four Pauline letters (Philippians, Colossians, Ephesians and Philemon) that are believed to have been written from prison.

**catholic epistles.** A traditional designation for the New Testament letters of James, Jude, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John that recognizes their importance for the whole (“catholic”) Christian community.

**codex.** An ancient manuscript in leaf or page form that was sewn together at the fold like books are today instead of being rolled as a scroll.

**criticism.** (Greek: judgment) A general term to describe the scholarly study of the Bible. It includes scientific, historical and literary methods plus various other approaches for discovering the many meanings of the text.

**Dead Sea Scrolls.** A group of manuscripts found in 1947 in caves near the Dead Sea. They include manuscripts of several Old Testament books and commentaries and some other writings that were probably part of the library of the separatist ascetic community known as the Essenes. These Jewish sectarians lived at Qumran, which was destroyed by the Romans in AD 68.

**deuterocanonical.** (Greek: second canon) Seven books (Wisdom, Sirach, Baruch, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Tobit, and Judith) and parts of two others (Esther and Daniel) that are not in the Jewish canon but were included in the Greek Septuagint. They are considered canonical by Roman Catholics but non-canonical (apocryphal) by many Protestant groups.
**diaspora.** (Greek: scattered, dispersed) A general description of the many Jews who resided outside of the Holy Land, for example as a result of exile, emigration or conquest.

**epistle.** A letter generally written for public reading in the Christian assembly to proclaim the Christian message, to teach and explain Christian beliefs and to identify and encourage proper Christian behavior.

**exegesis.** (Greek: draw out, hence, explanation or interpretation) The explanation of the meaning of the biblical text, in particular through the use of the historical-critical method, to understand the author’s intended meaning.

**form criticism.** The scholarly study of the origin and transmission of the biblical texts and of the sources used in their composition.

**fundamentalism.** When used to designate a common modern approach to biblical interpretation, this term normally identifies a pre-critical approach that does not employ the historical-critical method and thus separates the Bible from its location in the Christian tradition. The result is a naively literalist reading of the Bible meant to support rigidly conservative doctrines.

**Gnosticism.** (Greek: knowledge) A form of religion that stressed that human salvation and the right relationship with God come primarily through esoteric or mystical knowledge. It was rejected by the Christian community in the second century as heretical. In 1945–46 a cache of some fifty Gnostic texts was discovered at Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt.

**gospel.** (Greek: evangelion; Anglo-Saxon: Godspell; good news) A general description of the Christian message. Later it was primarily associated with the four canonical narrative versions according to Mark, Matthew, Luke and John. Scholars today also apply it to some non-canonical texts.

**Hebrew.** The Semitic language used by the Israelites from the fourteenth to the fifth century BC, after which it was retained in their sacred written texts but was gradually replaced in everyday life by Aramaic and then by Greek for Jews in the Mediterranean diaspora outside of Judea.

**Hellenization.** (Greek: Hellas, or Greece) The domination of the Greek language, culture and thought over the whole Mediterranean world as a result of the conquests of Alexander the Great in 333–323 BC.

**hermeneutics.** (Greek: interpretation) The scholarly study of the theory and practice of textual interpretation.

**historical criticism.** A general term for modern critical, biblical scholarship that attempts to situate ancient texts in their specific historical circumstances in order to discover the original meaning intended by the authors.
**inerrancy.** In the Catholic theological sense, the belief that the biblical books are without error when properly interpreted and understood. The Catholic doctrine limits the inerrancy strictly to the divinely revealed mysteries and the “truth which God wanted to put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation” (*Dei Verbum*, #11). Any errors of historical or scientific fact are therefore attributed to the limitations of the human authors.

**inspiration.** In the Catholic theological sense, the belief that God somehow assisted the human authors in the composition of their biblical books so that the divinely revealed message was communicated through their human words. “Inspiration” expresses our belief that God helped the human authors to compose their books, but does not describe how it was done.

**Koine.** (Greek: common) The Greek language of everyday conversation and writing commonly used throughout the Mediterranean world following the conquests of Alexander the Great. All of our New Testament texts were written in this Greek dialect.

**literal sense.** The meaning that the author intended at the time of writing and that the written words expressed. Determining this meaning is the goal of the historical-critical method of Scripture scholarship. For Scripture scholars, to “take things literally” means to determine what the original author meant.

**Masoretic Text.** (MT) The definitive text of the Hebrew Bible, with vowels (indicated by dots or points) and punctuation supplied by Jewish grammarians (the Masoretes) from the seventh to tenth centuries AD.

**method.** (Greek: a way over) A general and repeatable set of procedures used in order to explain the meaning of texts. The historical-critical method combines historical and literary procedures to determine the original historical situation and the author’s originally intended meaning.

**mystery.** In its Catholic theological sense, this identifies a spiritual reality that so transcends the ability of the human mind that it is impossible to fully comprehend or completely explain it, e.g., the Trinity and the Incarnation.

**New Testament.** The official collection (canon) of twenty-seven sacred Christian texts that are considered revealed, inspired, inerrant regarding the truths of salvation and authoritative for Christian belief and practice.

**Old Testament.** The collection of sacred texts from the Jewish tradition that have also been included by Christians in their Bible. The number of books varies from thirty-nine (Protestant canon) to forty-six (Catholic canon) because of the inclusion of some books written in Greek for Hellenistic Jews, which were included in the ancient Greek Septuagint translation. (See deuterocanonical.)
palimpsest. (Greek: rub again) A parchment manuscript that has been erased (by scraping) and then written on again, often leaving traces of the original writing that scholars can also decipher.

parallelism. A distinctive formal characteristic of Hebrew poetry rooted in their oral tradition in which balanced couplets generally relate to each other through variant repetition in which the second line reinforces the first by emphasizing either similarity (synonymous) or difference (antithetic). Hebrew poets also used several other methods of variation to lead the mind from one thought to another (cause/effect, statement/example, question/answer, etc.).

pastoral epistles. A convenient description of the Pauline letters 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, which incorporate the “pastoral” advice of Paul to these helpers chosen to carry on his ministry. Scholars are divided about whether these letters were actually written by Paul himself or perhaps by some later follower claiming the authority of his tradition.

Pentateuch. (Greek: five scrolls) The first five books of the Old Testament (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy), also called the Law (Torah) and the Five Books of Moses.

pericope. (Greek: to cut around) A short section or passage of writing, such as a small division or unit of Scripture taken for reading or analysis.

prophetic literature. The collection of writings by those God called to speak God’s message to the Israelites and their rulers. The prophets’ intent was not to foretell the future but to recognize God’s presence in current events and to identify the consequences of the king or people’s disregarding or neglecting this presence.

proverb. A short memorable saying that incorporates the traditional wisdom gained from careful observation of nature and human life. Proverbs were usually expressed in poetic parallelism for greater impact and easier recall.

psalm. (Greek: song) A song accompanied by music. The biblical book of Psalms consists of 150 psalms divided into five parts. These songs express the whole spectrum of our human response to God in good and bad times.

pseudepigrapha. (Greek: falsely entitled) Works written in the name of another (usually a more famous) person or attributed to another as author. Scholars today also use it to designate the collection of works that are apocryphal.

redaction criticism. The scholarly analysis of textual composition to discover how multiple sources were used in the later process of editing (redacting). This type of study is used in particular to carefully analyze the editorial process of the synoptic gospels and thus to discover the unique form, content and function of each author and to appreciate each author’s unique artistry and theology.
**revelation.** (Latin: to unveil) God’s free self-disclosure of the hidden mystery of God’s own person and God’s historic plan for human salvation.

**rhetorical criticism.** The scholarly analysis of texts in order to understand their persuasive function, in particular how they have been shaped by their authors to bring about their effects on the audience.

**Septuagint.** (LXX) (Latin: seventy) The Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible done in Egypt beginning about 250 BC. It also included several books written in Greek. It was adopted by early Greek-speaking Christians as their Bible.

**source criticism.** The scholarly identification and analysis of the different sources that were used to shape a text, such as the “documentary hypothesis” of four sources used for the Pentateuch (JEDP—Jahwist/Elhoist/Deuteronomist/Priestly) or the two source theory (Mark and “Q,” a collection of Jesus’ sayings used by Luke and Matthew but not Mark) for resolving the problem of the relationships between the synoptic gospels.

**synoptic gospels.** (Greek: seen with one glance) The gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Because of their literary interrelationships and their generally similar structure, they can be put into parallel columns for a closer examination of their similarities and differences.

**TaNaKh.** (TNK) The modern Jewish, scholarly name for the Hebrew Bible derived from the initial letters for the three divisions of the Bible: Torah (Law), Nevi’im (Prophets), and Ketuvim (Writings).

**textual criticism.** The scholarly study of ancient manuscripts to ascertain the most likely original form of the text and to trace the history of its transmission through variant forms in the available manuscripts.

**typology.** A traditional form of biblical interpretation in which Old Testament persons or events are understood as patterns or models (types) for understanding New Testament persons or events. For example, Matthew considers Moses as the pattern or “type” that can help illuminate the person and work of Jesus as a prophet, community builder and lawgiver.

**Vulgate.** (Latin: crowd, thus, common) St. Jerome’s Latin translation of the Bible from the Hebrew and Greek near the end of the fourth century AD. It remained the official Roman Catholic translation used both for study and for liturgical worship until the twentieth century.

**wisdom literature.** The collection of traditional learning that deals with the mystery of our world and of everyday life. The Jewish tradition sought to merge this secular tradition with their specifically religious beliefs and guidelines (*Torah*).
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