

SCRIPTURE FROM SCRATCH

Session 1: GUIDE TO THE BIBLE

For my parents' & grandparents' generations, Catholicism & personal Bible reading were not normally linked. The Bible was special; there was an awe about it; it was a very holy book. Most Catholic homes had a family Bible & it had a special place in the home. Our home was no exception. We had a big Bible with gilt-edged pages, full of pictures. The honoured place? On top of the wardrobe in my parents' bedroom next to a statue of the Infant of Prague! Inside the front cover were the baptism certificates, my parents' marriage certificate & dates of the anniversaries of my deceased uncles & aunts. Catholics of that generation probably knew there were people in the church who studied the Bible; the parish priest must have read & understood it. But rarely would a lay Catholic ever break the spine of the family Bible & actually read it.

Protestants were the ones who read the Bible. In fact, the Bible was what their faith was all about. We Catholics had the Mass, the sacraments, the catechism, personal devotions, Mary & the saints. These were the ways we experienced the presence of God & learned about our religion. What more could we need?

There are lots of historical reasons for this Catholic state of affairs in the middle of the 20th cent. The church had an exaggerated fear of private interpretation of the Bible. Perhaps reading your own Bible would lead to all sorts of false understanding. Better to let the church teach us what we needed to know.

This started to change in the 1960s. One of the most significant changes of Vatican II was the church's direct encouragement for Catholics to rediscover the Bible. The reformed liturgy had a wide selection of readings from both the OT & NT. The church put Scripture at the heart of liturgical preaching, religious education, & personal devotions. Catholics began to be exposed to biblical texts they had never heard, & many started reading the Bible like never before.

Popes John Paul II & Benedict XVI called our era a new springtime for the church & urged us to undertake a new evangelisation. Pope Francis in his recent Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel) urged us to embark upon a new chapter of evangelisation marked by joy. The bishops have called us to study our faith with new vigour & make adult faith formation a high

priority. More than ever before, Catholic Bible study is essential for the ongoing renewal of our church.

Christianity: The Religion of a Person

Christianity is sometimes described alongside Judaism & Islam as a “religion of the book.” But that description isn’t totally accurate, since Christianity is really the religion of a person, Jesus Christ, the Word of God, to whom the words in the Church’s book (the Bible) bear witness. In the words of Benedict XVI:

“Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon & a decisive direction.” (Deus Caritas Est 1, 2005).

The Word of God in Human Language

“For the words of God, expressed in human language, have become like unto human speech, just as the Word of the eternal Father, when he took on himself the flesh of human weakness, became like unto human beings.” (Dei Verbum 13)

This quotation uses the analogy of the incarnation of Jesus the Word of God to describe the presence of both divine & human elements in Scripture. Like all analogies, it’s not without problems. But it has become a modern (with patristic roots) Catholic way of preserving the traditional understanding of the Bible both as coming from God under the guidance of the Holy Spirit & as put into human language by the biblical writers. Just as we profess Jesus to be fully divine & fully human, so we look on the Sacred Scriptures as both divine & human.

When biblical texts are read publicly as part of Catholic liturgies, each reading is usually introduced by specifying the book the passage is taken from. The reader says: “A reading from the prophet Isaiah” or “A reading from the Gospel according to Mark.” In this way the historical contribution of human beings to the “word of God” is recognised & honoured. At the end of each passage, the reader adds: “This is the word of the Lord” or “This is the Gospel of the Lord.” In this way the divine origin of the biblical text is highlighted.

This practice expresses nicely the Catholic insistence on the Bible as both divine & human. It’s a subtle way of saying the Bible is the word of God in human language.

What does the word "Bible" mean?

The word Bible comes ultimately from the Greek. The Greek word for book is βιβλος. So in English we have words like "bibliography" – a listing of books. In Greek a diminutive form for a small book or booklet was βιβλίον – the plural βιβλία. So in Greek τα βιβλία means "the small books". So the Bible is not one book, but a *collection* of books. It's a little library. Exactly how many books are in this library & how they are arranged, varies. We'll look at this shortly.

The same Greek term τα βιβλία or βιβλία, was taken over into the West where the main language was Latin. In Latin the normal word for book is "liber" - we get English words like "library" from it. But since the collection of Jewish & Christian sacred texts came more & more to be considered one, the word βιβλία (a neuter plural word in Greek), was understood in later Latin as a singular noun "the book". From here the name "Bible" passed into all our modern languages. So the word "Bible" has in its history both a plural reference – a collection of books - & a single reference – The book.

If you open your Bible at the table of contents, you'll see it's divided into two unequal parts, the Old Testament (OT) & the New Testament (NT).

What does the word "Testament" mean?

The OT makes up about two thirds of the Bible. What is a "Testament"? & what is new & old about it?

The word "*Testament*" comes from the Latin "Testamentum" which is itself a translation of a Greek word which is a translation of a Hebrew word! It may be clearer if we begin first by looking at the Hebrew word. In Hebrew the word is *Berith* which means "covenant". It's a term from the social & political culture & organisation of the Ancient Near East. There were different kinds of covenants in the ancient world, but they were all ways to establish a relationship between two parties, parties who before were either enemies or strangers. Covenant brought them together & expressed a unity.

When Israel came to reflect on what God had done for them, & on their relationship to God, they drew on this analogy or comparison from their experience of covenant. God had entered into covenant with Israel. The books we now call the OT deal in different ways with this reality.

c.250 yrs before Christ, the Jews who were living in Alexandria, a major Greek city in northern Egypt, began to translate their sacred writings into Greek. So how did they translate the Hebrew word *Berith*? The normal Greek equivalent would have been a word **σινθεκε** (“sintheke”) but they didn’t choose this. Instead they chose another word **διαθεκε** (“diatheke”). In classical Grk διαθεκε could mean “covenant”, but usually it means “last will” or “testament”. We’re not sure exactly why they chose this word. Some think they wanted to highlight that just as the terms of a will or testament are set down by the testator, in the same way God sets the conditions of the covenant. So in secular usage διαθεκε meant primarily “last will” or “testament”. But in the context of the Greek translation of the Jewish Scriptures it takes on the meaning of “covenant”.

When the Latin translation was made from the Greek, διαθεκε was translated by “*testamentum*” which means only “last will & testament.”

So we go from the Hebrew where *berith* means only “covenant”, to the Greek διαθεκε that means “covenant” but mostly “testament”, & wind up with Latin “*testamentum*” which means only “last will & testament.”

Referring to the covenants as “old” & “new” is obviously a Christian designation. There is no “old” covenant until & unless there is a “new” one. This terminology reflects the Christian belief that the covenant of God with Israel at Sinai, & the covenant with Israel & the nations through David, are in some sense “old”. That in Jesus of Nazareth something new has taken place.

The use of the terms “old” & “new” has roots within the Bible itself. In Jeremiah we read “*the days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the House of Israel & Judah*” (Jer. 31:31). & at the Last Supper Jesus gives his disciples the cup saying “*the cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.*” So the terms “old” & “new” have roots in the Bible. But the old doesn’t cease to have value. It’s not: we have a new covenant so let’s get rid of the old one! The covenant of God with Israel is still in effect, has meaning & the Jewish Scriptures that tell us of that covenant continue to have significance both in themselves & in relationship to the new.

The Christian Bible is the OT with the NT, not the NT against the OT. In the first instance the terms “old” & “new” covenant refer not to books or writings but to reality. God’s covenant with Israel & then the covenant in & through Jesus Christ.

How are the books of OT divided?

The books of the OT, written in Hebrew & Aramaic, are arranged, numbered, & titled in several different ways in Jewish, Orthodox, Catholic or Protestant Bibles. Ancient & modern Jews divide their Bible into three parts:

1. The five books of the **Law** (Hebrew, *Torah*, also called the *Pentateuch*, a Greek word meaning “five books”) are: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers & Deuteronomy.
2. The eight books of the **Prophets** (Hebrew, *Nevi'im*) are divided into two groups:
 - the *Former Prophets* (that Christians call the “Historical Books”): Joshua, Judges, Samuel & Kings;
 - & the three *Latter Prophets*: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel.
The twelve minor prophets, considered as one book, are: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah & Malachi.
3. The eleven books of the **Writings** (Hebrew *Ketuvim*, also called the *Hagiographa*, Greek word meaning “holy writings”) are: Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth), Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, & 1 & 2 Chronicles.

By taking the first letter of each of these Hebrew titles – *Torah*, *Nevi'im*, *Ketuvim* – the acronym *Tanak* was formed, the word for Judaism’s sacred Scriptures.

Most Christian Bibles have adopted the ancient Greek order of the Jewish Scriptures, which arranges the books of the OT in four parts:

1. The Pentateuch
2. The historical books
3. The wisdom books
4. The prophetic books

The difference between the Jewish & Christian arrangement of the books is not just accidental, but there is a real theological issue involved.

In the Jewish understanding, the Torah – the first five books – is the centre of revelation: it tells us who God is, what God has done, who we are & how we are

to live. The task of the Prophets is to pass this on & interpret Israel's history in terms of living the covenant.

In Christianity, Jesus is the centre of revelation. In his life & work we see who God is & what God does, & we see who we are & how we are to live. For the Christian, the centre of revelation has shifted. So the books of the Torah become part of the historical books & not a separate distinction of their own. Likewise the task of the Prophets is seen differently. Rather than looking back to Sinai & the covenant as in Judaism, they now look forward to the future revelation in Christ. So the Books of the Prophets which are in the middle of the Jewish canon right after the Torah, are placed at the end of the collection & are immediately followed by the Gospels. This would be particularly the prophets that the Jewish canon called the Later Prophets – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel & the Twelve.

So for the Christian community, the centre of interest of the OT does not come at the beginning – the Torah – instead it comes at the end as the books of the Prophets follow the Penteteuch & the Writings & before the NT which they point to.

How many books are in the OT?

The number of books in the OT depends on which version you are using! There are 24 books in the Hebrew Bible. The breaking of Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra & Nehemiah into two parts was done later by Christians who added 1 & 2 to some. Jews count the 12 Minor Prophets as one book – while Christians count them separately.

There are 39 books in Protestant & 46 in Catholic Bibles! Even more in Orthodox Bibles!! You're probably wondering what are the extra 7 books in the Catholic Bible?

To answer that we need to go back to the time of Alexander the Great (C4th BC) – after he conquered the world from Greece to Persia & as far as India in the East, Greek became the dominant language. Greek-speaking Jews who lived outside the land of Israel needed a translation of the Bible they could understand. (The dispersion of the Jews throughout the world after the Babylonian Exile is called the *Diaspora*).

Legend is that, in 3rd BC, 70 Jewish scholars were commissioned to translate the Hebrew Bible into Greek in Alexandria, Egypt. Supposedly they worked independently & arrived at the same translation in 70 days (no.7 in the Bible = “complete” or “perfect”, a number made sacred by the 7th day, the Sabbath). This translation is called the “**Septuagint**” (Latin for 70, abbreviated LXX). It included 7 books that were either written in Greek or at a later date: *Tobit*, *Judith*, *1&2 Maccabees*, *Wisdom*, *Sirach (Ecclesiasticus)* & *Baruch* – as well as later additions to Daniel & Esther. Catholics & Orthodox Christians call these 7 books *deuterocanonical*, = “second canon”, not because they are less important but because they were settled at a later time than the *protocanonical* books, or “first canon.”

What is meant by the “canon” of the Bible?

The word “canon” comes from the Greek κανών which in turn is derived from a Semitic word which means a “reed”, “a straight rod used for measuring”. From this it came to be understood as “a rule” or “norm”, “a standard by which to measure.” Thus canon law is normative for the community. Persons who are “canonised” i.e. the saints, we recognise as guides or norms for living Christian life. Biblical canon = a collection of texts considered authoritative & divinely inspired & therefore included in the Bible.

At the time of Jesus there was no agreement among Jews or Christians on what made up the Scriptures (“the writings”). It used to be common to affirm that at the time of Christ the Jewish canon existed in two forms:

- the Shorter One from Palestine,
- the Longer One deriving from the Greek-speaking Jews in Alexandria, Egypt.

More recent discoveries have called this into question. It seems the first part of the Jewish canon, the Torah, was normative already very early, sometime after the Babylonian exile – let’s say c.500 BC. The Prophets, at least in some circles, were recognised as normative by c. 180 BC. & the third part, the Writings, were open-ended at the time of Christ.

At the time of Christ we know there was a *diversity of Judaisms* & they did not seem to agree on the limits of the canon. You had:

- the Samaritans, the Torah only;

- the Sadducees, perhaps only the Torah;
- the Pharisees, the Torah, the Prophets, most of the Writings;
- the Essenes at Qumran, the Torah, the Prophets, most of the Writings, plus some other works.
- Greek-speaking Jews outside of Palestine: the Torah, the Prophets, the Writings & other works, especially some written in Greek.
- & then early Christianity which at first was another type of Judaism, was similar to the Greek-speaking Jews as Christianity spread into the Greek-speaking world.

So Christianity did not inherit from Judaism a Biblical canon that was already closed. Later, between 100-200 AD, when the Jewish canon of the Hebrew Bible was closed, Christianity was already travelling a different way.

As Christianity spread from Israel throughout the ancient Mediterranean world, most Christians spoke Greek. They used the Greek Septuagint translation of the Bible that their Greek-speaking Jewish neighbours used. When the books of the NT were written, the authors quoted most OT passages directly from the Septuagint.

By the year 110 AD, Christian writers were quoting the 4 Gospels. By 200 AD the 4 Gospels, Acts & some letters written by Paul, Peter & John were already regarded as Sacred Scripture equal to the Hebrew Testament. 367 AD St. Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, made the first known list (canon) of the 27 books of the NT.

By the C4th most Christians spoke Latin & no longer understood Greek. c.382 AD Pope Damasus wanted a single “authorised” Latin version of the Bible. He asked Jerome, a Latin scholar, to translate the Gospels, Psalms & other books of the OT into Latin from the original languages. This was St. *Jerome’s Latin Vulgate* (= “common” or “popular”). But he suggested the apocryphal books should not be regarded as fully canonical or used for establishing church doctrine. Augustine defended the wider Greek & Latin canon & his view was eventually endorsed in late C4th & early C5th.

This was the situation up to time of the Reformation in C16th. Martin Luther translated the Bible from the original languages into German (1534). He restricted the OT canon to the Hebrew canon & rejected the additional books of the Septuagint. This is why today some Protestant editions of the Bible include

the 7 apocryphal (deutero-canonical) books in an appendix or a special section between OT & NT. He also called into question some NT letters.

The Catholic reaction to the Protestant Reformation came with the Council of Trent (1545-1563). In 1545 Trent accepted 46 OT books of the Septuagint, following what appeared to them as a firm tradition of the church from ancient times. St. Jerome's Latin Vulgate (= "common" or "popular") became the official translation of the Bible for Catholics for centuries.

The NT Canon

The earliest Christians did not set out to produce a NT or their own "canon" of Scripture – the OT was the Bible for the earliest Christians. But by 200 AD there was general acceptance in the churches of what may be regarded as the core books of what came to be the NT canon:

The 4 Gospels
The Pauline Letters
1 Peter & 1 John

By c.400 most churches accepted 27 books of NT. The NT canonical process probably began with Paul's letters. While they were originally addressed to specific Christian communities & their pastoral problems, very soon these letters were judged to have lasting value for other Christians too. So they were collected into packets & sent round to other communities. Likewise the 4 Gospels, though probably composed with the pastoral needs of particular communities in mind, soon began to be circulated & read all over the Mediterranean world.

The Scriptures of the early Church were still the Greek version of the OT. But once the Pauline letters & the 4 Gospels came to be read in the various churches & gained some sort of religious authority, the movement to the concept of a canonical NT composed of Christian writings was launched.

Two things helped the development of a NT canon – two extreme forces within early Christianity.

1. **Marcion** – a wealthy Christian living in Rome in mid C2nd rejected the OT & proposed as Christian Scripture only Lk's Gospel & 9 Pauline letters (& even these were to be purged of "Jewish" elements).

2. **Christian “Gnostics”** (literally, those “in the know”) & others producing books they called Gospels, which claimed to describe revelations of Christ to NT figures e.g. Thomas, Peter, Philip, James & Mary Magdalene.

Mainline churches in Rome & elsewhere refused to get rid of the Greek OT – after all it was their Bible & the earliest source for Christian theology. But they also didn’t want to expand their Bible to include all the new documents coming from Gnostic circles. There was no universal authoritative church council to decide the matter. It seems to have been decided gradually & somewhat obscurely.

Apparently there were 3 criteria in determining the canonicity of a document:

1. **Apostolic origin** – a document that was clearly non-apostolic was rejected. There was at least some presumption of an apostle as the author (Mt, Jn, Paul, Peter, James, Jude) or some association with an apostle (Mk with Peter & Paul, Lk with Paul).
2. **The rule of faith** – orthodoxy - a document must faithfully reflect the teaching of Jesus & the apostles. A book had to be consistent with the basic doctrines recognised as normative by the churches.
3. **The consensus of the church** – a document must have been used & accepted by the early Christian churches. The fact that they were being widely used in local churches & were being quoted by reliable bishops & theologians.

Brief Survey of the OT

1. The OT fittingly begins with the **5 books of the Pentateuch**.
 - **Genesis** describes a pre-history of God’s call & preparation of a people in creation & the patriarchs.
 - **Exodus** portrays the mighty deeds of the deliverance of Israel from Egypt & the giving of the covenant.
 - **Leviticus** describes the obligations of that covenant
 - **Numbers** adds more laws, & continues the story of Israel’s time in the desert.
 - **Deuteronomy**, written as a speech of Moses, deepens & sums up the meaning of the covenant for Israel later on in her history.
2. The **Historical Books** explore the living out of the covenant in the promised land of Palestine.
 - **Joshua** describes its conquest

- **Judges** the settlement & struggle for survival
- **1 & 2 Samuel** the growing need for, & coming of, its first kings in Saul & David.
- **1 & 2 Kings** traces the history of religious fidelity in the kings after David to the end of the monarchy c.586 BC

Since all 6 books have a style & message similar to Deuteronomy, they are known as “**Deuteronomic History**”. They teach one consistent lesson that points out Israel’s infidelity to the covenant & warns of coming destruction.

In Jewish tradition, these 6 books are called “**The Former Prophets**”, because they have a strong prophetic tone of moral judgement. Many of the lessons are put into the mouths of various prophets.

3. After the destruction & exile (586 BC), **1 & 2 Chronicles** again looked at Israel’s history from the perspective of a **priestly writer**, & its account was carried forward to the end of the 5th cent. BC in the Books of **Ezra & Nehemiah**.

This later period after the exile also saw many smaller works.

Ruth tells the story of a faithful Israelite woman from the time of the Judges.

Esther tells of a faithful Jewish queen in the Persian court of the 5th cent. BC.

Judith tells how a heroine at the time of the exile saved her people.

Tobit describes a faithful Israelite from among the people exiled in 722 BC to Assyria.

All of these are moralistic tales stressing the best qualities of Jewish piety, & were both edifying & entertaining. They helped to communicate a sense of Jewish pride after the exile period. The original incidents may have been based on historical persons or deeds, but these were long forgotten or beyond our ability to recover them. So they are best called “**edifying tales**”.

Finally, the post-exilic period is brought to a close by the two **Books of Maccabees** which tell the story of the Jewish revolt for independence against the Greek government of Syria in 168-164 BC. They contain some reliable history (though not necessarily reliable according to modern Western criteria), as well as many edifying stories.

4. The next section, the **Writings**, contains many profound & beautiful examples of Israelite reflections on faith & life.

The **Book of Psalms** gives us the prayers & hymns of both personal & public worship.

Job wrestles with the question of suffering & God’s goodness.

Proverbs, Qoheleth, Sirach & the Wisdom of Solomon offer the proverbial statements & insights of the wise men.

The *Song of Songs* is a series of love poems treasured as an anthology of God's love for his bride Israel.

5. The *Prophetic Books* are divided into two major parts by our modern Bibles: the *major & minor prophets*. The main reason for the division is size.
 - The *major prophets* are all long books – *Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel*, in line with the LXX, is included here, but strictly speaking it belongs with the Writings as an inspirational work. It forms the first of a biblical type of *apocalyptic* literature – we may be familiar with this from the NT Book of Revelation (or Apocalypse)
 - The *minor prophets* are called “*The Twelve*” in the Jewish canon, probably because they were all copied down, one after the other, on the same scroll to save space. These prophets range from *Amos*, the first prophet in the 8th cent., down to *Joel & Malachi* in the 5th or even 4th cent. BC.

Israel's History According to the OT

3000 → 2000

Growth of Semitic Civilisation: The flourishing Semitic civilisation in Mesopotamia (Sumer, Akkad, Babylon, Assyria) & in Syria-Palestine (Mari, Ebla) provides the cultural backdrop for the beginning of biblical traditions.

1900 → 1300

The Patriarchal Period (Gen 12-50): The migration of peoples & the life of mixed nomadic & village settlements are the setting for the earliest traditions of God's revelation to Israel's ancestors as “the God of their Fathers.” The latter half of this period was spent by several of the tribes living in northern Egypt.

1300 → 1250

The Exodus & the March to Canaan: The most likely time for Moses & the exodus events is during the reign of the Pharaoh Ramesses II (1290-1235 BC). The experiencing of God & the receiving of the covenant at Mt Sinai were the central events in forming the idea of the “Chosen People”, Israel, & was the real beginning of the twelve tribes as one nation (the Books of *Exodus, Numbers, Joshua*).

1250 → 1020

The Period of the Judges: The invasion of Canaan by the tribes under Joshua did not lead to immediate conquest. It began a 200 year period of fighting, internal upheavals, peaceful penetration, & tribal alliances that gradually formed Israel into a single nation (see *Judges & 1 Samuel*).

1020 → 930

The united monarchy of David & Solomon: the monarchy was the highpoint of Israel's power & prestige as a nation. In just 100 years, they moved from a tribal federation to a modest empire with its own highly developed culture. This led to tensions between the values of the tribal past & the secular ambitions of the new kings (see *2 Samuel & 1 Kings 1-12*).

930 → 722

The Empire of David & Solomon splits: the Northern Kingdom (Israel) & the Southern Kingdom (Judah) develop different interpretations of Israel's past traditions that will both be reflected in the Bible. The two kingdoms fight one another, as well as the small states to the east: Damascus, Edom, Moab. The great Assyrian Empire begins its rise in the East, & efforts to fight it off prove ineffectual. Israel is defeated & its leaders go into exile in 722/721 BC (*1 Kings 13 – 2 Kings 17*).

722 → 586

Judah alone: Judah survives as the only independent part of Israel. It is a period of submission to Assyria's power. Some kings resist (Hezekiah & Josiah), others give in totally (Manasseh). Eventually, despite religious reforms under Josiah (640-609), Judah's kings resist the new Babylonian Empire of Nebuchadnezzar, which overthrows Assyrian rule, & Judah is destroyed in two invasions in 598 & 587 (*2 Kings 18-25*; also *Jeremiah*).

585 → 539

Babylonian Exile: A period of exile in Babylon follows for all the leading people of Judah. Its end is conventionally reckoned by the defeat of Babylon in 539. The Persian king Cyrus the Great allows the Jews to return home.

539 → 332

The Post-Exilic Period: Judah remains a very small state of the land immediately around Jerusalem. It no longer has any independence but is ruled by Persian governors & guided religiously by the high priests of the Temple. Ezra (458-390) & Nehemiah (445-420) begin the religious reform that leads to the canonisation of the Scriptures & the religious practices based on the Torah.

332 → 175

Greek Rule: Alexander the Great conquers the Near East & begins the Hellenistic period of Greek culture & rule. The Jews still have no independence. They are governed first by the Greeks in Egypt (Ptolomies) & then after the Battle of Paneas in 198 BC, by the Greeks in Syria (Seleucids).

175 → 1BC

The Maccabees: This Jewish family fights for independence & wins a limited freedom for Judah in the period from 175-63 BC. Infighting among Jewish groups leads to the rise of the major Jewish factions of the 1st cent.: Pharisees, Sadducees & Essenes. Pompey, the Roman general, enters the area in 63 & establishes Roman rule. Eventually, the Romans give power to a local ruler, Herod the Great, who controls Palestine for the Romans down to the birth of Christ.

The Bible in English

The Bible was eventually translated into English. The earliest complete translation in English dates from 1382-1384. An English controversial figure named John Wycliffe, attacked the church & its doctrines in different ways, but he also produced an English translation.

Beginning in the context of the English Reformation & the RC reaction to it, we have two English Bible traditions that are very important. King James I of England appointed a commission of scholars to produce a new translation based on Hebrew & Greek. They drew on earlier translations, completed in 1611, & it is known as the ***King James Version*** or the ***Authorised Version*** because it was authorised by King James. When it first appeared, as you might expect, there was opposition to it: “this is new”, “we’re not used to this”, “it sounds funny” etc. But very soon it became the standard translation & its impact on English

literature has been very strong. Over its 400 year history there have been later revisions.

Perhaps the best-known is the *Revised Standard Version* (RSV) [1957]. An edition including the books RCs call deuterocanonical (the Apocrypha) was published in 1977. The RSV was completely revised & issued as the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV) in 1990 & is perhaps one of the most popular translations.

The RC community also produced an English translation based on the Latin Vulgate known as the *Douai-Rheims* translation taking its name from two French cities. The translation was done between 1578 & 1610 by two English scholars (Gregory Martin & Richard Bristow) who were exiled from England. This was revised by Bishop Richard Challoner in London in 1738 & was the English translation used by English-speaking RCs until the 1960s. When Pope Pius XII in an Encyclical in 1943 encouraged translations to be made from original languages, new translations into English began to appear based on the Hebrew & Greek such as the *New American Bible* (NAB) 1970 & the so-called *Jerusalem Bible* which appeared first in French & then translated into English.

For a while Catholics were forbidden to read Protestant Bibles, this was in the old Code of Canon Law. The reason was not primarily because of the translation of the Bible, but because they were often accompanied by notes which could be very anti-Catholic in tone. This situation changed considerably after Vatican II. The RSV & the NRSV received Catholic approval & in fact some Catholics helped serve on the committee which produced the revised translation. In the same way the NAB produced by the American Catholic community, several Protestants helped in the final stages of that translation.

In the second half of C20th cent there was an explosion of new Bible translations under Catholic, Protestant & Jewish auspices. You might ask why do we have or *need all these new translations?*

We can point to three reasons:

- The discovery of ancient manuscripts
- Changes in the English language
- Emergence of different translation philosophies

1. We have better manuscript (ms) material. Over the last 150 years a number of important ms discoveries have been made which help us to reconstruct the text better. The Dead Sea Scrolls discovered in the late 1940's provided new evidence for the Hebrew texts of the OT books that was over 1000 years older than what was previously available. Our knowledge of the ancient languages – Hebrew, Aramaic & Greek – has vastly improved due to the discovery of these ancient texts – Biblical & non-biblical.
2. Our English language has changed. At the time the King James translation appeared & the Douai-Rheims, William Shakespeare was alive & well & writing his plays. We need special glossaries to understand what he is saying, we don't understand some of the words anymore or we can misunderstand them because words change their meanings.

Two quick examples. Exodus 16:3 talks about the Israelites “*sitting by the fleshpots of Egypt.*” How many sermons have you heard talking about & referring to the “fleshpots of Egypt”? Thinking of sins of the flesh, sexual sins. The Hebrew has nothing to do with that. It means we had pots with meat cooking in them, we're here in the desert starving, we wish we had food! The English language itself is alive & changing, so we need to take that into account in translations. Translations should communicate in our language an understanding of the text.

3. Translators have been giving new attention to the purpose & the audience for which the translation is made. Two basic approaches:
 - Formal equivalence (literal) translations try to reflect closely the wording & syntax (grammar) of the original writings insofar as this is possible within the limits of good English.
 - Dynamic equivalence translation is more concerned with conveying the sense or meaning of the original text, without being overly constrained by the original's wording & syntax. Those in favour of this approach claim it can & does produce more accurate translations in that today's readers can understand better what the original author was trying to communicate.

How do I find a Scripture reference in my Bible?

Each book of the Bible is divided into chapters, & each chapter is made up of a series of numbered verses. For example:

- **1 Samuel 7** refers to the whole seventh chapter of the book of 1 Samuel (pronounced “first Samuel” because there is also a 2 Samuel, or “second Samuel”).

- *Genesis 1:1* refers to the book of Genesis, chapter 1, verse 1.
- *Numbers 5:2-6* refers to the book of Numbers, chapter 5, verses 2,3,4,5 & 6 i.e. consecutive verses
- *1 Corinthians 3:2-6, 8-10* refers to the book of 1 Corinthians, chapter 3, verses two to six and verses eight to ten.

Abbreviations are often used in Scripture references. E.g. “Jn 3:16” means “John, chapter 3, verse 16”. A list of abbreviations can be found in the front of your Bible. To find a particular book, use your Bible’s table of contents.

Some Useful Tools for Studying the Bible

Get a Bible if you don’t already have one! Cf. notes on the various translations.

▪ ***Bible Commentaries***

These useful books are written by biblical scholars to give a summary of scholarly findings on individual biblical books. Usually the author will take each passage & explain something of its background, the situation in which it was written, & the meaning intended by the original author. Sometimes commentaries help the reader understand the fuller meanings of the passage & begin to apply it to contemporary life. Commentaries can help when read along with the biblical books. Some examples:

The New Jerome Biblical Commentary, Raymond Brown, Joseph Fitzmyer, Roland Murphy (eds), New ed of 2nd Rev ed, Geoffrey Chapman, London 1995 (1532 pages!).

The Oxford Bible Commentary, John Barton, John Muddiman (eds), Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001.

▪ ***Bible Dictionaries***

These provide helpful information about specific topics, words or themes in the Bible. A few recommended one volume dictionaries:

John L McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, Geoffrey Chapman, London 1994

David Noel Freedman, Allen Myers, Astrid Beck, *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co., Cambridge 2000

Paul J Achtemeier, *Harper Collins Bible Dictionary*, 2nd Rev. ed, Harper & Row, 1997.

- ***Bible Concordance***

Lists all the places in the Bible where a given word is used. It can be helpful in several ways. E.g. if you want to find other passages in the Bible where the word “covenant” appears in order to compare its use throughout the Bible, just look up “covenant” & you’ll find the complete list. Or if you remember a few words of a passage but don’t remember where to find it in the Bible, just look up one of the words you know, then look for its chapter & verse in the concordance. Each concordance is linked to a particular translation since different Bibles use different English words to translate the original texts.

- ***Bible Atlas***

Useful help for making the places of the Bible come alive & to trace e.g. Abraham’s journey from Ur, Moses and the exodus, the missionary journeys of St. Paul.

- ***Gospel Parallels***

Useful for comparing texts in the Synoptic Gospels.

Burton H. Throckmorton, *Bible: NRSV Gospel Parallels*, 5th ed., Trust Media Distribution, New York 1993.

A very useful website in this regard is that of the Electronic New Testament Educational Resources by Felix Just SJ: www.catholic-resources.org/

- ***Other Useful Websites***

Online Bible: www.catholic.org/bible/

Bible Search Engine: www.bible.catholic.net/

Introduction to the Bible: A powerpoint presentation on the background & basics of the Bible: www.saintpaulsvergennes.org/

What Bible to Use?

I'm often asked "What Bible should I buy?" So a few remarks if you're looking for a Bible, on what Bible to get. There are so many on the market.

- New translations, especially those produced by groups, are all basically reliable. The old problem of tendentious bias translation is largely past.
- Secondly, if you're looking for a Bible produced under Protestant auspices, be sure to get one with the Apocrypha or Deutero-Canonical Books.
- Thirdly I'd recommend getting an annotated bible. The Bible can be difficult reading at times & a good annotated (or Study Bible as they are sometimes called), can be a great help. They include introductions to the books, comments on various verses, general articles & maps & things like this. All Catholic translations come with some brief notes but a good study edition is the Catholic Study Bible. For the NRSV there are several study versions – the New Oxford Annotated Bible, the Harper Collins Study Bible, the New Interpreter's Study Bible.

▪ *Revised Standard Version (RSV)*

The RSV, a complete revision of the American Standard Version (1901) in the tradition of the King James Bible, was started by 30 scholars in 1937 & completed in 1952. It was made available in American & English editions. It tried to present as accurate a translation as possible while upholding standards of English diction appropriate to public & private worship.

▪ *New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)*

Published in 1990, it's a far-reaching revision of the RSV. It has done away with "thee" & "thou" & "art" (for "are") & "dost" (for "do"). It has tried, where possible, to use language which does not exclude women. But the NRSV tries to stay as close to the originals as possible while keeping the high literary standards of the RSV.

▪ *Jerusalem Bible (JB)*

The work of RC scholars, mostly British. It is based on a careful examination of the Hebrew & Greek originals but it follows the French *Bible de Jerusalem*. It tries to present poetic parts of the originals in a suitable modern poetic idiom.

Above all, it strives for clarity of expression, often, it must be said at the expense of the original meaning.

- ***New Jerusalem Bible (NJB)***

A revision of the JB, published in 1985. It tries to be more faithful than the JB to the original Hebrew & Greek & is more consistent in its translation of words. It tries to keep the high poetic quality of its predecessor & uses inclusive language whenever possible.

- ***New English Bible (NEB)***

This broke away from the influence of the KJV (AV) & tried “to say in our own native idiom what we believed the author to be saying in his.” Scholars representing nearly all the major churches in GB & Ireland managed to produce a translation which is lucid, fresh & natural, if, on occasion, somewhat basic. It’s a Bible in plain rather than ornate English.

- ***Revised English Bible (REB)***

Appeared in 1989 as a complete & thorough revision of the NEB. It does away with “thou” & “thee” & half-heartedly tries to use inclusive language. Its efforts to provide an even fresher & more vivid translation than its predecessor are not always successful.

- ***New American Bible (NAB)***

The first English Bible to be translated from the original Hebrew & Greek texts by American Catholic scholars. It was partly updated by revision in 1987. It tries to render the original texts as closely as possible while trying to convey the meaning as clearly as possible. It is surprisingly weak in its efforts to embrace inclusive language & it is conservative in its use of modern English idioms. The English of the NAB is, of course, American.

- ***Good News Bible (GNB/TEV)***

Sometimes called Today’s English Version (TEV), completed in 1976. It tries to provide a translation easily accessible to all who read English, whether as a first or second language, while aiming to reproduce the meaning of the original texts as closely as possible. Every effort has been made to use language that is clear, simple & unambiguous. A feature of the GNB is the line drawings by the

Swiss artist, Annie Vallotton. It's Britain's most popular Bible. Its aim to use the language of ordinary people occasionally leads to over-simplification of the original texts.

- ***New International Version (NIV)***

Produced in 1978 by an international team of scholars who wanted to avoid sectarian bias in their work. Based on the best available manuscripts, it seeks faithfulness to the originals & clarity of style. It aims, therefore, to be suitable for public reading & private study. Its advertisers claimed it to be the most trustworthy of all modern translations, a claim not all would agree with.

- ***New King James Bible (NKJB)***

Or the Revised Authorised Version (RAV), published in 1982, is an attempt to preserve the historic dignity of the original KJB of 1611 but to update all that is no longer easily understood. It's the Bible most used by conservative Protestants in the USA (when not using the KJB). It has much of the glory of the old KJB & all of its defects.

- ***Rheims-Douai Bible (RDB)***

An English translation of the Latin Vulgate done in France. The NT was published at Rheims (1582) & the OT at Douai (1609-10). This has nurtured RCs throughout the English-speaking world for the past few centuries. It bears all the scars of its history. It was a fine translation when completed in 1610. It suffered then what it suffers now. Like all translations of its time, it was made when scholars did not have available to them the vast amount of manuscripts in Hebrew & Greek now available. As a result, like the KJB, it can't be relied on to give an accurate translation of what the original authors wrote. It's not now widely available & it's time to lay an old servant to rest.

- ***The Christian Community Bible (CCB)***

Done in 1988, it's the work of RC Missionary scholars with direct experience of the human condition from the centre to the fringes of human existence, from Europe to South America to Asia; experiences of the human condition in the rich city centres, impoverished villages & destitute favelas & slums that surround both. The translation is based on the Hebrew & Greek texts. The extensive introductions & notes explain the theological, spiritual, sacramental &

social life of the Christian Community in the light of the Scriptures thus making both intelligible & accessible to all the members of the community. In a number of countries the CCB has become the official translation of the local Church.

▪ ***The Bible – translated by Nicholas King SJ***

Published by Mayhew in 2013: “The translation is from the original Greek & includes the texts often referred to as the Apocrypha. Nicholas King’s aim has been to keep as close to the original Greek as possible, frequently incorporating idiomatic or grammatical peculiarities. The result is a translation which is exceptionally stimulating & sometimes startling. Readers will find that it shakes off the dust which often settles on passages that have become tired from over familiarity or frequent quotation.’

And finally....

Almost all publishers of modern Bibles provide a range of editions.

- You can buy a Bible in paperback without any notes or aids of any kind.
- You can buy a large hardback edition with excellent maps, introductory notes to each section & each book & helpful footnotes to guide you through the text.
- Some publish large print editions, helpful for those with impaired sight.
- Some highlight the words of Jesus in red print.

At no time in history have English-speaking people had such a variety of excellent translations of the ancient scriptures of Jews & Christians. To benefit from this happy state of affairs, the first-time buyer would do well to buy a Bible with all the aids that modern scholarship & modern publishers can provide. This may cost a little more than you anticipated, but buying a Bible is like anything else: you get what you pay for!

Brian Purfield
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