

Discovering the Riches of the Bible

Series one: Introduction to the Bible

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Introductory Remarks:

The notes given below are only provisional. They are definitely not exhaustive. They do not treat of every opinion on a question. They are meant to be of some help to those who want to begin studying the Bible.

1. Bible is God's word revealed to his people. How do we understand it? Much of what we read is easily understood. The Holy Spirit guides us in our reading. However, some background knowledge of the Bible will help us understand it better.

2. **The word 'Bible'** itself is simply a transliteration of the Greek word *biblos* (*βιβλος*), meaning "book." So, the Bible is, quite simply, *The Book*. However, take a step further back, the same Greek word also means "scroll" or "parchment." It is thought the word *Biblos* itself is likely taken from an ancient seaport city named Byblos. Located in modern-day Lebanon, Byblos was a Phoenician port city known for its export and trade of papyrus. Because of this association, the Greeks likely took the name of this city and adapted it to create their word for book. Many familiar words such as bibliography, bibliophile, library, and even bibliophobia (fear of books) are based on the same Greek root word.

3. **The Catholic Bible contains** 46 books in the Old Testament (OT) and 27 in the New Testament (NT) – total of 73 books. We will mention something more later when we speak on Canonicity.

The OT contains three distinct parts: the Law (Torah); the Prophets (Nabiim); and the Writings (the Ketubim) (cf. the Hindi word – Kitab). The Jews put these together and called the three as **TANAK**.

By 180 BCE, the date of the Book of Sirach, the Torah and the Prophets, including the 12 minor prophets were known. This is evident from Sirach 49:10. The Wisdom writings would have continued at least until the first century BCE.

4. **Constitution of the People Israel:** One must remember that with the Exodus happening about 1250-1200 BCE, (one of the possible constructions), the Egypt Group mingled with the Canaan group. Both were peasant or slave groups. However, the Egypt Group came with a powerful story of God's deliverance, which was then absorbed in the course of the next two hundred years even by the Canaan Group. This is basically the Mendenhall-Gottwald theory.

5. **Oral Tradition:** The OT is much dependent on oral tradition, which began at least with the start of the monarchy in the 10th century BCE, with Saul and David. Earlier, we could call this tradition as J tradition (Yahwist) begun in the South. The Northern tradition was the E tradition (Elohist). Both these traditions spoke of their identity – "Who we are and where we have come from?". However, today, scholars are slow to designate texts of the Torah to either of these two traditions because they claim we cannot be completely sure of their provenance. So they prefer to call them non-P.

6. **The D and the P traditions** both are concerned with “How we are called to live.” These traditions are later. The D (Deuteronomistic) tradition perhaps started in Northern Israel in the 8th century but with the destruction of the north (Israel) by the Assyrians in 722 BCE, the D - tradition definitely encompassed by the Book of Deuteronomy, entered the South (Judah). The use of the Deuteronomic law is definitely evident during the time of King Josiah and the prophet Jeremiah in the 6th century Judah. Based on this law, Josiah backed by prophet Jeremiah attempted a major reform of the social and religious life of people in Judah. It once again tried to centralize worship in Jerusalem.

The P (Priestly) tradition began in Judah before the Babylonian exile but it was in the exile that it took hold of all the oral and written texts of scripture until then and gave it a P stamp. Its activity continued definitely until the time of Ezra, the Scribe, 5th Century. By 428 BCE, a draft of the Book of the Law in Hebrew was presented in Jerusalem. This became the Jerusalem copy.

Excursus on the word, “Yahweh”: A difficult question is from when the deity of the chosen people of God, the Israelites, comes to be known as Yhwh? In Egypt, the God of Moses gives his name as “I am.” There are many opinions. However, a significant one is that Yahweh was not a god adopted by Israel from the Canaanites, nor yet a god whom it worshiped from remote antiquity; but that it first came to know him at the time of the Exodus. The question now arises: Whence did it derive the knowledge of this god? How did it begin to worship him? According to this opinion, Yahweh was the God of the Kenites, who spring from the ancestor Cain. Cain is marked by God so that after his murder of Abel, no one will attack him. It is a mark of protection (cf. Gen 4:15). The Hebrews on their sojourn through the wilderness on the way to the promised land, they met with the tribe of Kenites in Edom. It is well to remember that Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, was a Kenite, who had had a considerable influence on Moses. As the chosen people entered Canaan, the Kenites accompanied the tribe of Judah. The tribe of Judah was under considerable influence of the Kenites than other tribes (cf. Josh 15:22, 57). The Kenites knew Yahweh as a God whom their fathers had worshiped from time immemorial. As they mingled with Judah, the idea would naturally be transferred to the Judeans that Yahweh had also been their ancestral God. The God who thus had compassion upon the oppressed, and who came to their rescue even though they did not worship him, was evidently a God possessed of a moral character. He redeemed Israel, not because of kinship, or because it was for his interest to do so, but because of his love of righteousness. This was a new thing in the history of religion, and it could not fail to be fraught with far-reaching consequences. Yahweh’s demands of Israel correspond to his moral character. Since he has chosen Israel to be his people, he asks that it shall choose him to be its God. Yahweh, the God of the Kenites displayed strong moral requirements. The two leading ethical characteristics of the Old Testament religion (devotion to Yahweh and kindness toward the helpless), are seen to be inferences from the fact that Yahweh, the God of the Kenites had pity upon an alien people. God’s declaration, “I have brought thee up out of the land of Egypt out of the bondage,” was the sign that the God of the Kenites had adopted Israel (Lewis Bayles Paton, “The Origin of Yahweh-Worship in Israel I and II,” *Biblical World* 28 (1906): 6-22, 113-127). This is just one attempt to secure the provenance or origin of the name YHWH. It is an attempt that began in the 19th century.

However, the worship of Yhwh was mixed up with Baal in the land of Canaan. The fact that the prophets repeatedly warn the people of their sin of idolatry reveals that the notion of monotheism had not yet arrived. The faith of the people tended to be syncretic. When would

the people ultimately arrive at pure monotheism? It is here that the Babylonian exile plays a vital role.

Significance of the Exile: Judaism received its identity and a real literary stamp at this time. The bulk of the OT was composed in Exile. The belief in one God Yhwh was also firmly established.

7. **The Torah in Jerusalem:** From this Jerusalem copy in Hebrew (cf. no. 6 above), we have the LXX (Septuagint) Greek text of the Torah emerging in the 3rd century in Egypt. Also the Samaritan Pentateuch and the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS) used this Jerusalem text as its mother text. This becomes important because scholars will later want to compare texts.

8. **The Torah in Babylon:** Whereas, the Hebrew text in Babylon had its own independent history cut off from Jerusalem and Judah. As a result, the text here remained pristine, at least as far as the Torah was concerned. It is this text that was in NT times adopted by the Jews in the first century as the basis of the Torah and not the Jerusalem draft copy. In the fifth century of our era, some scribes, called Masoretes, took this text and supplied the consonantal text with punctuation, vocalization (vowel sounds) and text-critical marks. This text came to be known as the Masoretic Text. It is this text that is normative today for the OT. It is from this text which we possess in the Leningrad and Aleppo Codices that we have the OT in English and other languages of the world. The edited OT Hebrew Text is called the BHS.

9. **As far as the NT is concerned,** we have three situations or **Sitz im Leben**, of Jesus, the Church and the Evangelist. **Jesus** spoke and acted. There were no tape-recordings. After his death and resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit, we have the birth of the **Church**. It is in the church that the words and deeds of Jesus were remembered, adapted to situations, written in compilations such as parables, miracles and passion narrative. Passion Narrative (PN) would be the first to be written for its use in the Eucharist. Gradually, the **Evangelists** who were part of their own church assemblies, wrote the Gospels. Mark was the first gospel to be written, about 70 CE. Followed by Mathew (Mt)- Luke (Lk) with infancy narratives, about 85 CE, and then John, about 95 CE, beginning with Jesus' pre-existence. **Pauline writings** predate the gospels. The first NT writing was 1Thess, about 49 CE.

10. **Chapters and Verses:** The text of the Scriptures did not, in the beginning, have chapters and verses. These were supplied later. In 1227 CE, Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury (1207-1228), divided the Bible into chapters for each book. The Wycliffe English Bible of 1382 was the first Bible to use these chapter divisions.

The Jewish OT was divided into verses by a Jewish rabbi Isaac Nathan in 1448. But the NT was divided into verses for the first time in 1551 by Robert Estienne Stephanus in his 3rd edition of the Greek Bible.

The Torah was also divided by the Jewish Rabbis into 53 parashah sections, so that the entire Torah is read in a year, one per week. Whereas, in 167 sederim (sing. Seder) divisions for liturgical celebrations.

11. **Bible for what?** It is a faith document. As 2Tim 3:16-17 says, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work."

The Word of God is the soul of theology. Reading of Scripture among Catholics seriously started only in the second half of the 20th century with the Encyclical of Pope Pius XII, *Divino afflante spiritu*, meaning, Inspired by the Holy Spirit, on 30th September, 1943. The significance of the Word of God was then stressed at the II Vatican Council, in its decree *Dei Verbum*. It has been given great importance ever since by all the Popes and Synods. The Word of God is useful for preaching and formation of peoples. The word of God is the foundation of evangelization.

12. The Word of God and Inspiration: How is the Word of God, the Bible, different from any other spiritual book? Definition of Inspiration: Pope Leo XIII, in his encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*, in 1893, explains how inspiration affected the biblical writers. "By supernatural power God so moved and impelled them to write. He was so present to them, that they rightly understood, then willed faithfully to write down, and finally expressed in apt words and with infallible truth the things which He ordered, and those only."

The **second Vatican council** teaches about inspiration thus: "Those divinely revealed realities which are contained and presented in Sacred Scripture have been committed to writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. For holy mother Church, relying on the belief of the Apostles (see John 20:31; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet 1:19-20; 3:15-16), holds that the books of both the Old and New Testaments in their entirety, with all their parts, are sacred and canonical because 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 men and while employed by Him they made use of their powers and abilities, so that with Him acting in them and through them, they, as true authors, consigned to writing everything and only those things which He 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 solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation. Therefore "all Scripture is divinely inspired and has its use for teaching the truth and refuting error, for reformation of manners and discipline in right living, so that the man who belongs to God may be efficient and equipped for good work of every kind" (2 Tim. 3:16-17, Greek text). (DV 11)."

There is difference between revelation and inspiration?: Revelation implies infusion and perception of new ideas, new knowledge. Inspiration does not in itself imply new knowledge. Many saints had revelations (such as Margaret Mary). In writing down their revelations, they had no charismatic assistance from God and therefore their writings are not inspired scripture.

Inspired writing has God for the principal author. He directs the writer to ordinary sources and strengthens his judgment. Scripture may teach some truth which comes under the domain of speculative judgment or may produce some effect, by inciting practical judgment. For e.g., Book of Jonah, one truth, that God is the God of all peoples not only the Jews. This is the speculative truth. The manner in which this is conveyed is through a story that involves practical judgment. Therefore, we cannot impugn or overthrow the truth by saying there are no whales in the Mediterranean Sea or that not all the Ninevites were converted.

Again, in the Books of Judges, the author does not commit himself to the historical accuracy of Samson, Jephthah, Deborah etc. but conveys the truth that idolatry brings on retribution, enemy invasion. But God never deserts his people in spite of their sin. He raises great leaders to rescue them. Or, again, the Book of Job, the Book of Genesis.

The total extent of inspiration concerns all faculties of the sacred author. Both speculative and practical judgments are inspired. Inspiration extends to all the contributors of each Book. Translations are not inspired except the LXX (the Legend of Aristeas).

Truth of Scriptures: There is no “formal” error (involving speculative judgment).

Inerrancy is linked with the author’s formal object in his composition, for e.g., the story of creation in Genesis. Inerrancy is qualified not merely by the formal object of his work but also by his degree of affirmation. (For e.g., 1Thess 5:1, Christ’s imminent coming. How certain was Paul? Only to that degree of certitude present in his mind at the time of making a statement is present and attributable to the statement itself.

The consequence of Inerrancy is not historicity (historical exactitude) but truth.

13. Canonicity of the Bible:

OT – Proto canonical; Deuterocanonical; and Apocrypha

OT 39 books Proto canonical (Jews, Protestants and Catholics) whose inspiration not in doubt. These are in Hebrew.

7 Books Deuterocanonical (Catholics). These are in Greek. The Protestants call them Apocrypha means hidden. These books arose in the diaspora. These books are Tobit, Judith, Baruch, Sirach, Wisdom, 1-2 Macc and Greek Additions to Esther and Daniel. Their inspiration was in doubt. Even Jerome doubted the inspiration of the Book of Tobit which he is said to have translated from Greek to Latin in a night.

A total of 46 Books by Catholics.

NT 27 Books (Protestants and Catholics).

Total of 73 Books in of the Bible. The Council of Trent fixed the canon as 73 Books.

Catholic Apocrypha: OT – Testament of the twelve Patriarchs; III Esdras; III-IV Macc; Book of Enoch; Assumption of Moses, etc. Date 3rd to 1st century BCE.

NT Apocrypha: Gospel of Thomas; Gospel of Philip; Gospel of Judas; etc. Date: 1st to 3rd century CE.

The difference between canonical and apocryphal books is that the former are brief, sober, objective without fantasy.

14. Text of the Bible:

OT BHS from the Leningrad Codex (Aleppo Codex); DSS; Samaritan Pentateuch, etc.

NT Until 2012, Papyri p1-127 (2nd -3rd century CE); Uncial Mss 01- 0322 (from 4th century onwards); Minuscules 1-2882 (from 9th century onwards).

Qumran Essenes – Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS). 11 caves discovered. Important Mass, esp. Isaiah scroll, Temple scroll etc.

Translations: OT: Septuagint LXX; Aramaic Version called Targum meaning translation;

NT: Latin- Old Latin and Vulgate (Jerome); Old Syriac and Peshitta (acc. to tradition, Rabbula, bishop of Edessa);

15. English Translations:

Literal Equivalence (word for word translation);

Dynamic Equivalence (thought for thought); and

Optimal Equivalence (in between the above two).

Here see my article in the CCBI website on the Important Bible Translations:

<http://ccbibible.in/pdf/catholic-bible2020.pdf>

The CCBI has opted for the ESV Catholic Edition as the text for Liturgy. It is also a Bible to be used in the seminaries so that students get used to the text which they will later use as priests in liturgy. CCBI gave the *imprimatur* for the ESV-CE in May 2017. Two years earlier it gave its *imprimatur* to the NLT Catholic Edition. The NLT - CE is a Bible that uses dynamic equivalence.

16. Morality in the Bible:

Morality is evolving in the OT. There is first *lex talionis* (eye for an eye); Next, Theory of retribution (good rewarded and sin punished, cf. Decalogue Ex 20); There is then, the understanding of individual responsibility (Jeremiah and Ezekiel); innocent suffering in Job; Vicarious suffering in II Isaiah.

17. Interpretation includes exegesis and hermeneutics:

Exegesis is the understanding of a text both from a diachronic as well as synchronic point of view. While exegesis is concerned with the original author's point of view, it is considered today that such a point of view is not always available because of redaction having taken place at the level of copying or subsequently. Therefore, scholars also advocate the text-centred and the reader-centred approaches to scripture. The most considered approach is the conversation between the text and the reader informed by the world of the author.

Hermeneutics is the endeavour to grapple with the text from the aspect of its meaning for today.

18. Senses of Scripture:

The ability to understand the senses of Scripture is in view to grasping the meaning of the text better. Here see, The Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), 77-84 (http://catholic-resources.org/ChurchDocs/PBC_Interp-FullText.htm).

Literal sense – The sense intended by the author. This is the most important sense of scripture.

Spiritual sense – The above is true but also on a spiritual plane. That is, the author intends a meaning but in the light of the NT/Christ's paschal mystery, we see find a deeper meaning in the text. In the light of the mystery of Christ, the literal text is already a spiritual sense. Without literal sense one cannot speak of fulfilment of scripture. Spiritual sense is not a subjective interpretation which could lead to fundamentalist interpretations.

For e.g., 2Sam 7:12-13 – the oracle where God, speaking of a son of David, promised to establish his throne forever, is taken literally because Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more (Rom 6:9).

Fuller sense (*sensus plenior*) – This is the deeper meaning of the text, intended by God, but clearly expressed by the human author. For e.g., Mt 1:23 gives fuller sense to the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 in respect to *almah* (young woman – in Hebrew) by using the LXX *Parthenos* (virgin) – “the virgin will conceive.” He will be called Emmanuel.

Or, again, the four Servant Songs in Isaiah where the servant is more likely the people Israel but in view of a fuller sense it is applied to Christ.

Allegorical sense: Extended metaphor, e.g., vine and the branches (Jn 15); or, the king who sent his workers to collect his produce, finally sent his son (cf. Mt 21:33-44).

Accommodative sense: Here a NT author applies OT text to a different set of realities than in which it is found. For e.g., Ps 19:4, “Their voice has gone forth to the ends of the earth.” How creation is praising God. But Paul uses it in an accommodated sense in Rom 10:18.

19. **Literary Forms** (Genres) in the Bibles: Without grasping the genre or literary forms of texts, we could misunderstand their meaning. The literary forms include Myth, legend, debate, fiction, parables etc.

A good book that deals with literary forms is by Margaret Nutting Ralph, *And God Said What? An Introduction to Biblical Literary Forms* (Bangalore: TPI, 2011).

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