



## Basics of Biblical Literacy

BY TIMOTHY MICHAEL MILINOVICH

**T**he Christian canon of Scripture remains an unexplored mystery to many Catholics in America, even though it is one of the most influential texts in western civilization. To improve biblical literacy in recent years, Catholic educators have placed greater importance on informing the faithful about the Bible and its theological contents. This article attempts to provide basic biblical literacy for educators and students by giving an overview of the historical situation of major authors, challenges involved in translating and editing Bibles today, and ways to deal with difficult texts.

### Old Testament

The creation and compilation of the biblical books took place over many centuries. These books were collected into a single canon of Scripture. “Canon” comes from the Greek word *kanōn*, meaning a measuring rod or standard. The books of the Old Testament come in four major sections: the Torah (or law), the historical books, the Psalms and wisdom literature (referred to as “the writings”), and the prophets.

The Torah consists of the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Genesis tells of the origins of humanity and the selection of Israel as God’s own people. The remaining four, Exodus through Deuteronomy, explain how God released Israel from slavery in Egypt and brought them to the land in Palestine promised to Abraham. Although the exodus may have taken place in 1250 BC, the earliest collection of these stories did not occur until sometime during the early monarchy (ca. 1000 BC). This author/editor is often called the Yahwist, or “J”, for his consistent use of *Yahweh* as God’s name.

The next major edition came after 950 BC, when the Northern tribes of Israel seceded from the South (Judah) to form their own kingdom. This second editor/author is referred to as the Elohist, or “E”, since his texts refer to God as *Elohim*. The Northern kingdom was destroyed in 722 BC by Assyria. The book of Deuteronomy (whose author is referred to as the Deuteronomist or “D”) may have developed in the South after this time under the reign of King Josiah. Babylon conquered Judah in 586 BC and led many captives into exile. After this an editor of a priestly

tradition (“P”) included ritualistic and legal concerns to balance the existing stories with more updated theology. The Torah was likely completed as a text around 500 BC. The books of Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers contain work from J, E, and P. Leviticus is entirely from P, and Deuteronomy is almost entirely from D. The Torah remains the focus of modern Jewish worship and is also prominent in the Catholic Church’s lectionary.

The historical books of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings belong to the same “school” that penned Deuteronomy and are sometimes referred to as the Deuteronomistic tradition. These books tell of Israel’s rise as a nation, its division into two kingdoms, and finally Babylon’s defeat of Jerusalem (ca. 586 BC). The editors of these historical books made use of local folklore and royal court annals in their reconstruction. Their theology makes the Jerusalem temple the sole place of worship and blames the fall of the kingdoms on the idolatry practiced by the Israelite kings and inhabitants. The first edition likely was started in the time of King Josiah (ca. 750 BC) and was completed after the exile. This history of Israel is paralleled in the books of 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah. The latter, likely written after the return from exile, form a unique history that covers events from creation to the rebuilding of the Temple.

The wisdom books, or “the writings,” consist of Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), Wisdom, the Song of Songs, and Psalms. Some wisdom texts contend with the idea of law found in Deuteronomy, namely that one who fulfills the law will thrive while the sinner will die. Job and Ecclesiastes argue that the righteous can also suffer by no fault of their own. Proverbs and Sirach give advice for daily life. The wisdom books recognize the fear of God as the beginning of a wise and virtuous life. They give good ethical instruction with a philosophical tone. The Song of Songs describes a passionate relationship between its young, lovestruck protagonists. This relationship has been analogized to God’s relationship with Israel, or Christ’s compassion for the Church. The book of Psalms, a compilation of prayers, was gathered over centuries. The prayers include praise and lamentation from individual and communal settings. They attempt to grasp at the relationship between God and humanity in the most personal and dramatic

of situations. Because of their liturgical origins and their universal appeal, the Psalms are used in the Liturgy of the Word each day after the first reading.

The books of the prophets are the last group in the Old Testament. Their canonical position before the New Testament allows the words of the prophets that proclaim the dramatic intervention of God to be fulfilled in the books that immediately follow. The prophets performed their oracles in public areas and often spoke about events in their own historical framework. The earliest prophets were Amos, Hosea, Isaiah (mostly Isaiah 1–39), and Micah, who prophesied around the destruction of the Northern kingdom in 722 BC. Many prophets, such as Jeremiah, Zephaniah, Ezekiel, and Habakkuk, proclaimed the destruction of Jerusalem in the decades leading up to 586 BC. After the exile, many prophets wrote anonymously and added their oracles to those of traditional prophets. The second portion of Isaiah (Isaiah 40–55) heralded the rule of Cyrus and the return to Jerusalem with much joy. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah 1–8 argued passionately that Jerusalem’s problems would be solved if the Temple was rebuilt. The author of the third part of Isaiah (Isaiah 56–66) argued that the government should provide for the poor in a weakened infrastructure and then rebuild the temple.

The majority of Old Testament books were originally written in Hebrew; however, after Alexander the Great conquered Palestine in the fourth century BC, the books that would become the Old Testament were translated into Greek. The Greek version of the Jewish Scriptures came to be called the Septuagint. At this time other biblical texts, such as Tobit, Judith, Baruch, and 1 and 2 Maccabees, came to be written or translated into Greek and were subsequently included in the historical books of the canon. These books, along with Wisdom and Sirach, are included in the Catholic canon. They are considered “deuterocanonical” (second canon) by most Protestant churches and are not included in most Protestant versions of the Bible. The early Church accepted the list of books in the Greek Old Testament as Sacred Scripture, so these books have always been a part of the Catholic canon. But the Protestant reformers preferred to include only those books which were originally written in Hebrew.

The Hebrew canon was formalized around AD 90 by leaders of the rabbinic tradition. It included the original Hebrew version of the books and placed them in three major groups: the Law (Torah), the prophets (*Nevi'im*), and the writings (*Ketuvim*). The Hebrew canon is thus often referred to as the TaNaK. The texts were translated into Aramaic in the fourth century AD. The earliest texts of the Hebrew Bible still in existence are from the Dead Sea Scrolls (first century

BC) and from the rabbinic scribes (known as the Masoretes) of the medieval period (thirteenth century AD).

## New Testament

A division between the Old and New Testaments should not be over-exaggerated. Both are connected intimately by the promise of God’s plan of salvation and his intervention in human history. The New Testament is baseless without the Old, and the Old Testament is unfulfilled without the New. The New Testament is established in two major groups: narratives (four Gospels and Acts) and letters (Romans through Revelation). The first group comprises the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and Acts of the Apostles. The second major group is divided further: the letters of Paul, the letter to the Hebrews, seven general or catholic letters, and the book of Revelation.

Jesus’ ministry and Crucifixion likely took place around the year AD 33. The Church grew rapidly after the Resurrection and the descent of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. The Church began primarily as a Jewish movement: the Apostles proclaimed the death and resurrection of a Jewish Messiah who was foretold in the Jewish Scriptures. Thus some of the earliest documents appear to be, and often are, addressed to Jewish Christians. The dates of these letters are speculative (some place them as early as AD 50 or as late as 120), but their Jewish content makes them fine examples of earliest Christian theology. These include Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, and Jude.

Difficulties arose when communities wished to allow Gentiles (non-Jews) into the Christian community. There were questions of how the Gentiles could be part of this sanctified group. Some members felt that Gentiles should convert to Judaism to be Christian; they demanded that converts be circumcised and instructed in the law. Paul the Apostle was passionately in favor of proclaiming the Gospel and Resurrection of Christ to as many Gentiles as possible so that Christ might be proclaimed to the ends of the earth. Paul argued that those who believed in Christ were saved by faith, not works of the law or circumcision. Between AD 50 and 64, Paul wrote letters to different Christian communities in Greco-Roman cities. The reason for writing letters pertained to particular situations in each community. Paul was likely martyred in AD 64 in Rome.

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are often referred to as the synoptic Gospels because all three follow the same basic plot, or synopsis. Some think Mark to be the earliest Gospel, written around AD 70, after the failed Jewish revolt and the destruction of the second temple. Matthew is dated to around AD 80 and Luke to around AD 85. Many further conclude that Matthew and Luke both consulted Mark’s

Gospel in writing their own Gospels. Both Matthew's and Luke's Gospels seem to use a great deal of Mark's content, and at times they repeat Mark exactly (for example, see Mk 2:13-17; Mt 9:9-13; Lk 5:27-32).

Although the Gospel of Mark appears to be a foundational source for the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, the latter evangelists made many changes, or "redactions," that influenced the story and theology of their Gospels. In addition to drawing from Mark's Gospel, Matthew and Luke both appeared to use a hypothetical source of Jesus' sayings, sometimes referred to as "Q." This source is most noticeable where Matthew and Luke agree against Mark (examples include Mt 6:25-34; Lk 12:22-32; Mt 5:38-48; Lk 6:27-36; Mt 11:7-19; Lk 7:24-35). Luke also composed the Acts of the Apostles as a second volume to his Gospel.

The Gospel of John may have undergone many editions during its telling and retelling; the earliest may date to as early as AD 50 and the latest to around AD 90. This fourth Gospel differs from the synoptics in several aspects. John's Gospel depicts a three-year ministry for Jesus, whereas the ministry in Mark and the others takes less than one year. John foregoes a Last Supper scene and instead presents farewell speeches of Jesus and the washing of feet. These are just two of the differences that have baffled theologians since the second century. However, all four Gospels retain a status in the Church as the deposit of Jesus' teachings and of God's plan of salvation for humanity enacted through the ministry, sacrifice, and Resurrection of Jesus. The three letters from John (1, 2, and 3 John) are likely from around AD 75-90. The letters and Gospel appear to derive from the same community: they have very similar theologies, terminology, and poetic structures. They may well trace back to a community associated with John the Apostle.

The three letters in 1-3 John are also associated with the letters from James, Jude, and 1 and 2 Peter. These seven letters together are referred to as universal or "catholic" because they are directed to the universal Church, whereas Paul's letters are addressed to specific communities. Since seven is considered often a number of completion and wholeness (i.e., seven days in a week), it is possible that the number of letters also encouraged the universal description. The book of Revelation appears to have been written by a prophet named John, likely during the persecution of Emperor Domitian, around AD 90.

While the forty-six books of the Old Testament were accepted almost immediately in early local Christian communities, the formation of the New Testament went through a longer process. The list of twenty-seven books

that became the Catholic canon was publicly affirmed first by Athanasius (367) and then later formalized by the Church under Augustine at the Councils of Hippo (393) and Carthage (397). These books were accepted by a broad consensus after the fifth century. The bishops who attended the Councils of Florence (1442) and Trent (1546) codified the forty-six books of the Old Testament and the twenty-seven of the New Testament that exist in our canon today. The criteria for acceptance included apostolic connection, orthodox teaching, and universal acceptance among the local churches. In addition to defining and preserving the canon of Scripture, the Magisterium also has a duty to interpret Scripture in light of sacred Tradition and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

### Challenges in Modern Bible Translations

The books of the Old and New Testaments were perpetuated through the copying and recopying by hand of the texts. This recopying at times created changes or variants in the texts. For instance, in Romans 5:1 some texts read *echomen* ("Therefore we have peace with God" [author's translation]), while other texts read *echōmen* ("So let us have peace with God" [author's translation]). Books were often copied in scriptoriums in which one reader dictated aloud from a text while several scribes copied simultaneously. The difference between a short "o" and a long "ō" could easily be confused audibly, even though the difference is considerable theologically. Such differences in textual variants must be considered by translators when providing a modern rendering of the ancient texts.

Translators and editors of modern Bible versions must also deal with innate situations surrounding the Scriptures, namely matters of the passing of time and the changes to language and culture that have occurred during the intervening time period. Because of the distance in time, no texts exist besides the Bible to help us to understand the authors' intended message. History and language study, faith, Church tradition, and the interpreting power of the Spirit are necessary to bridge this temporal gorge.

Language is a significant problem. Every translation is an interpretation that must communicate an ancient idea into an understandable matrix for new readers. There are some words in the Scriptures that are so ancient or rare that they cannot be defined or translated without considerable speculation. Modern languages also involve curious problems. A number of biblical texts prefer masculine pronouns for all characters, even when women might be included. For instance, Psalm 1:1 reads literally, "happy is the man who does not live by the counsel of wicked men" (author's translation). Modern Romance languages, such as Spanish,

have similar gender customs with their pronouns, and so translations involving those languages are able to repeat the masculine pronouns directly. However, English uses neutral pronouns (they, those, them) for situations that naturally pertain to both men and women. With this in mind, the *New American Bible* (NAB) translates Psalm 1:1 as “happy those who do not follow the counsel of the wicked,” along with a footnote to explain the translation. All modern biblical translators and editors must deal with these and similar problems.

Beside the time and language barriers, the cultural gap presents problems for biblical interpretation. The violent stories of Joshua and the oracles of Nahum are difficult to stomach for a modern reader living in a peaceful, developed country. The daily matters of a pre-industrialized and mostly rural community are presupposed by the biblical authors and the original audiences. Modern readers must learn about ancient cultures to understand fully the underlying images of Gentile believers being transformed from aliens to citizens through faith and Christ’s sacrifice (Eph 2:19-22), or the upheaval of basic social customs in the image of a Roman centurion bowing down to an itinerant Jewish teacher (Mt 8:7-15).

### **Interpretation and Dealing with Difficult Texts**

The importance of Scripture in a modern believer’s life is vast, but it must always be seen in perspective. Scripture, by itself, is only one part of God’s Revelation to humanity and the Church. Sacred Tradition and the Magisterium are also required to communicate God’s Word by means of, and in coordination with, Scripture. Not one of these three can stand by itself. The Catholic Church does not hold to *Sola Scriptura* as do some Protestant denominations. Scripture did not come to believers of its own accord; rather it was limited and defined through years of Sacred Tradition. The speeches of the Apostles, who are predecessors of the Magisterium, proclaimed the Gospel of Jesus Christ and were part of Sacred Tradition long before they were collected into Scripture. Scripture could not begin without Tradition, and Scripture cannot continue without the maintenance and teaching of the Magisterium.

• The spiritual nature and content of Scripture makes it  
• both a wading pool in which a child can play and a deep  
• ocean in which the leviathan of human experience can be  
• encountered. To this degree the faithful today should be  
• aware of difficulties that may arise when working with the  
• Bible. So what should one do when having difficulty with  
• Scripture? First, one should talk with a priest or spiritual  
• director. Every scriptural question can provide an oppor-  
• tunity for pastoral growth. Second, one should consult the  
• Church Fathers. Great theologians of the Church, such  
• as Augustine, Chrysostom, and Aquinas, worked dili-  
• gently with Scripture in pastoral situations. (The Church  
• Fathers’ work can be consulted in the *Ancient Christian  
• Commentary on Scripture Series* [Downers Grove, IL:  
• InterVarsity Press].) Third, sometimes believers must  
• handle difficult texts in the same way they savor favorite  
• texts: by living with them daily. Catholic spirituality is more  
• of a marathon than a sprinting race. A person may have dif-  
• ficulty with a particular passage for years before the struggle  
• becomes helpful, and even central, to his or her relationship  
• with God. Fourth, one should recognize that Scripture is  
• foundational and helpful, but it is not the ultimate witness  
• of God’s love in one’s spiritual life. Tradition and daily life  
• in the Church also teach about God’s desire to dwell among  
• the faithful.

• Theology and Scripture, much like art, attempt to commu-  
• nicate reality through media. Scripture can never describe  
• the fullness of the reality of God’s love and plan, just as  
• no painting can fully describe the event within. Scripture’s  
• main purpose is to teach us that God can be encountered in  
• life and that he plans for the redemption of humanity as a  
• whole. Scripture, in many ways, is a theological understand-  
• ing of God’s relationship with humanity, and vice versa.  
• Regardless of how the human authors attempted to describe  
• them, communicating God’s love, sacrifice, and life-giving  
• power is the root, purpose, and goal of Sacred Scripture.