

Preparing for the Journey:

Basic Information





CHAPTER 1 OUTLINE

- *The many books and stories of the Old Testament help us to see the loving relationship between God and his people throughout history.*
- *It takes the help of the Church and some important skills and resources to accurately interpret the Bible.*
- *The organization of the Old Testament and the history of the Hebrew people shed important light on the scope of Salvation History.*
- *The Church considers the Old Testament the inspired Word of God, useful for study, prayer, and interpretation of the New Testament.*

canon

An official list of books belonging to the Bible, both the Old Testament and New Testament.

deuterocanonical

A term meaning “second canon.” Books included in the Catholic Old Testament but not in the Hebrew Bible. These additions are 1 and 2 Maccabees, Judith, Tobit, Baruch, Sirach, Wisdom, and parts of Esther and Daniel.

Tradition

The living transmission of the Church’s Gospel message found in the Church’s teaching, life, and worship. It is faithfully preserved, handed on, and interpreted by the Church’s Magisterium.

The many books and stories of the Old Testament help us to see the loving relationship between God and his people throughout history.

Introduction

An ancient Chinese philosopher named Lao Tzu once said, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” This wise saying applies to any journey we make in life. It also applies to every course we study. In order to complete the journey successfully, we need to know basic information at the onset. We need to prepare and to gather all the necessary supplies.

Similarly, it is important to prepare before we delve into a serious study of the Bible. Before we can actually start, there are many questions that need answers. If these questions are not answered at least briefly, it is hard to keep our minds on the task. The questions will only keep nagging us. Furthermore, if we don’t approach Bible study with the appropriate

background information, we may easily get overwhelmed or sidetracked. We may give up and never complete our journey. Most importantly, we must always keep in mind that the Bible is different from any other book. Since the Bible is the inspired Word of God, it “must be read and interpreted in the sacred spirit in which it was written” (*Dei Verbum*, 12).

So let’s begin with some basic preparation and background information. If you have additional questions about the Bible, record them in a notebook or journal.

What Books Make up the Old Testament?

This may seem like a simple question. But actually, it’s not. Catholics and other Christians call the first part of their Bible the “Old Testament” in relation to the “New Testament,” which has as its central object Jesus Christ (*CCC*, 124). Jews prefer the term “Hebrew Bible” because they do not use the New Testament.

When Jews refer to the “Hebrew Bible” and Christians refer to the “Old Testament,” they are basically talking about the same thing; however, there are differences. Catholics include forty-six books of the Old Testament (forty-five if Jeremiah and Lamentations are counted as one book) and twenty-seven books of the New Testament as part of the **canon** of Scripture.

The Old Testament is really a *collection* of books written over the course of a millennium, roughly between 1000 BC and 150 BC. The books were written predominantly in the Hebrew language. The early Church, however, differed with early Judaism in the decision about the canon of the Old Testament. The Church included seven books (1 and 2 Maccabees, Judith, Tobit, Baruch, Sirach, and Wisdom) not



included in the Hebrew Bible that were mostly written in Greek after 300 B.C. These seven books are referred to as **deuterocanonical**—“second canon”—to show that they are not accepted in the Jewish canon. Some of the deuterocanonical books also include additional chapters to older Hebrew books like Daniel and Esther.

At the time of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther decided to include only books in the Hebrew Bible. Most Protestant Bibles do print these seven books, but they include them in a separate section. Most Protestants read these books with great interest, and all Christian scholars study them. Nevertheless, to this day, you may hear people speak of “Catholic Bibles” and “Protestant Bibles” because of this very issue.

Who Is God?

In the Old Testament, the God of the Hebrew people has many names. But the most common name is “YHWH” (pronounced yah-way), the name that Moses first heard when he was called to be the liberator of God’s people in Egypt (Ex 3). Although there is some uncertainty about the origins of the name, it seems that the name YHWH is constructed from the basic Hebrew verb, “is.”

YHWH is usually translated as “I am,” but it could also be “I am the God who is” or “I am and will be.” Parts of this name YHWH are in many Hebrew personal names like the “iah” in “Isaiah” or “Jeremiah.” If these Hebrew names were translated into English, they would sound like Native American names: Isaiah literally means “YHWH saves” or “YHWH is salvation!” and Jeremiah means “YHWH has established.”

The non-Hebrew people in the ancient world had their own gods under many different names as well. Baal was the most popular god of the nearby Canaanites. Baal is mentioned in several places in the Old Testament. (More on this later in the journey.)

In some Jewish traditions, the name YHWH is itself considered too sacred to actually pronounce out loud. When reading the Bible, these Jews use “Adonai” (ah-doe-nye) as a replacement. Adonai simply means “Lord.” In order to help Jewish readers, most modern Hebrew Bibles have taken the vowel letters from the word “Adonai” and overlaid them on the consonants for YHWH. This strange combination was supposed to remind the reader to say “Adonai.” However, when Christian scholars read this in centuries past, they did not know about the

tradition, and thought it was a real word—which they pronounced “Jehovah.” Jehovah is actually a mistaken reading of the name YHWH. Sometimes when very Orthodox Jews write about God, they even write “G*d” to remind them of the mystery of the sacred name.

Catholics have no custom of not saying the name YHWH out loud. The Church holds that the name “YHWH” expresses God’s faithfulness: “despite the faithlessness of men’s sin and the punishment it deserves, he keeps ‘steadfast love for thousands’” (CCC, 211). Church **Tradition** also teaches that the name YHWH reveals that God is “the fullness of Being and of every perfection, without origin and without end” (CCC, 213). As revealed to the Hebrews, God’s love for us is steadfast, faithful, and constant.

One way to think about the Old Testament is that it contains books about the Hebrew people learning about YHWH over hundreds of years. In other words, God reveals himself through the words of the Old Testament precisely because he *intends and wants to be known by humans*—there are no secrets or hidden tricks. God’s very being is Truth and Love. For the ancient Hebrews, they summed up what they knew of God with the name “YHWH.” Catholics, too, affirm that part of studying the Bible is remembering that the God of our Faith has revealed himself as YHWH, the God who is. In the fullness of time God revealed himself completely in the sending of his Son, Jesus Christ.



Sharing the Faith

Write a thank-you letter to a person who has taught you about God and Faith.

Knowing the Basic Story Line

Unlike most books, the Old Testament is not one continuous plot divided into episodes or chapters. Instead, what is central to the Old Testament is one loving relationship through history between a people and their God.

It’s easy to understand from a human perspective why this relationship would be so important throughout the Old Testament. God created man out of love and calls

“Jesus is Lord!”

(CCC, 203–210, 446–451)

One way Jesus and early Christians expressed his divinity was by making connections between the way he described himself and the ways God was named in the Hebrew Scriptures, that is, “YHWH.” In John’s Gospel there are a series of sayings that include the words “I AM,” referring to God’s self-identification to Moses in the Old Testament as YHWH, which is translated as “I am.” You will probably recognize many of these “I am” statements:

- “I am the bread of life.” (Jn 6:35, 48)
- “I am the light of the world.” (Jn 8:12; 9:5)
- “I am the good shepherd.” (Jn 10:11–14)
- “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” (Jn 14:6)

Another connection between Jesus and YHWH of the Old Testament is Jesus’ identity as “Lord.” Since YHWH was a sacred name, *Adonai* was used in its place. Early Christians had the same feelings about the sacredness God’s name so they referred to Jesus as Lord. St. Paul quotes an early Christian hymn in his letter to the Philippians that ends with a common early Christian acclamation, “Jesus Christ is Lord!” (Phil 2:11). When the Apostle Thomas recognized the Risen Christ as Jesus, he exclaimed, “My Lord and my God!” (Jn 20:28). In addition, throughout the Gospels Jesus is addressed as “Lord” by those who seek help and healing (Mt 8:2; 14:30; 15:22). “By attributing to Jesus the divine title ‘Lord,’ the first confessions of the Church’s faith affirm from the beginning that the power, honor and glory due to God the Father are due also to Jesus” (CCC, 449). To say “Jesus is Lord!” is an expression of the divinity of Christ.

YHWH, Adonai	The Lord Jesus Christ
God is <i>YHWH</i> , which is translated “I am” (Ex 3:13–14)	John’s “I am” statements (Jn 6:35, 48; Jn 8:12, 9:5; Jn 10:7; Jn 10:11–14; Jn 11:25; Jn 14:6, Jn 15:1, 5)
<i>Adonai</i> , or Lord, was used in place of God’s sacred name (Ex 3:15)	“Jesus Christ is Lord!” was a popular early Christian acclamation (Rom 10:9, 1 Cor 12:3, Ph 2:11) Jesus is often addressed as “Lord” (Mt 8:2; 14:30; 15:22)



us all to love. “To love” is the fundamental vocation of being human. This offer of God’s love to man can be understood in the context of Christian marriage where the mutual love between a husband and wife “becomes an image of the absolute and unfailing love with which God loves man” (CCC, 1604).

Yet, there are ups and downs in any relationship to go along with the wonderful times. Readers of the Old Testament discover that man’s relationship with God is not always amiable. The story of the fall of man (Gn 3:1–24) tells of man’s disobedience of God. This first **sin** would affect man’s relationship with God from that time on. Some first-time readers of the Old Testament are often surprised how the authors of Scripture describe the level of anger that God is said to feel in return to man, especially as expressed through his special messengers called “prophets” (more on them later).

Like all relationships, this divine-human one described in the Old Testament has its dramatic episodes of jealousy and angry disappointment. But perhaps most impressive, the Old Testament also exemplifies moments of moving intimacy, love, compassion, and forgiveness. YHWH, according to the ancient Hebrews, had very human-like qualities. That is not so odd when you think about it. After all, how else can we picture a living God? Our words are never sufficient to entirely portray God, but words are necessary to communicate and to even think about God. The Hebrews wanted to talk to God! They wanted *a relationship*.

Perhaps part of the spell that the Old Testament casts on all those who study it is not unlike the fascination of being in love, with all the wonders provided by the occasional surprises, disappointments, and great joys of

romantic relationships. It comes as no surprise that the study of Scripture is compared to “being in love” with “Lady Wisdom” (Prv 3:13–18).

Have you ever received a letter from a loved one? Perhaps a new boyfriend or girlfriend? If so, you take your love letter home and read it and re-read it. You want to “hear” the words of love and affection again and again. For modern Bible study, and our relationship with God, it is as necessary to re-read the previous words spoken between us as it is to continue to find new words to speak and new skills for listening to God today. In short, it is essential to return to the source, which is Scripture.

Section in Review

Quick View

- The Catholic Old Testament is a collection of forty-six books including seven deuterocanonical books.
- The Old Testament contains the story of the Hebrew people learning about God, whose name is “YHWH” and whom they called “Adonai.”
- This story of Salvation is about the loving relationship between God and his people.

For Review

1. **Vocabulary:** Use the terms *canon* and *deuterocanonical* to describe the Old Testament in a short paragraph.
2. **Vocabulary:** What does the name “YHWH” mean?
3. **Main Idea:** What is the basic story line of the Old Testament?



Prime Advice

The Book of Deuteronomy records these instructions of the Lord:

Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Dt 6:6–9 NRSV)

Read Deuteronomy 6:4–5. What is the subject of the Lord’s instructions? Make a sign illustrating the heart of the Lord’s instruction. After sharing your sign in class, hang it in your room at home to remind you of your ongoing relationship with God.

sin

An offense against God. Sin is a deliberate thought, word, deed, or omission against the eternal law of God.

Magisterium

The teaching authority of the Church concerning issues of faith and morals. The Magisterium consists of the Pope and the college of bishops acting together.

4. **Critical Thinking:** What are the differences between the Hebrew Bible, Catholic Old Testament, and most Protestant Bibles?

For Reflection

In what ways has God's love for you been steadfast, faithful, and constant? Write a short testimony of your Faith to someone younger than you (e.g., a younger sibling, someone in a religious education class, or a scout) in a letter.

It takes the help of the Church and some important skills and resources to accurately interpret the Bible.

How the Church Interprets the Inspired Writings

The Catholic understanding of inspiration is that human authors who were deeply moved by God wrote the Bible. The Church has accepted their writings because through the same wisdom of the Holy Spirit that inspired the original authors, the Church leaders—the Pope and bishops—have also been inspired.

The written Scriptures along with the oral preaching of the Apostles are handed down in the Church through apostolic succession. The living transmission of the message of the Gospel of the Church, accomplished in the Holy Spirit, is called Tradition. The Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition are bound closely together, and communicate with one another. Likewise, the task of interpreting God's Word, whether in the form of

Scripture or Tradition, is entrusted to the **Magisterium**. This means that it is the bishops, in communion with the Pope, who can interpret God's Word for each generation. The Church relies equally on Scripture *and* her living Tradition to enrich all people with God's Word. "Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence" (*Dei Verbum*, 9).

The particular writings of the Bible are valuable and powerful and help in our learning about God and how he builds up his Church. The judgment that these writings are inspired comes from the experience of the Church with these writings. They did not come to the Church pre-packaged and pre-marked: "These are the inspired books." Instead, the Church leaders (Magisterium) read and studied them and came to realize that they were inspired. The Pontifical Biblical Commission wrote: "What characterizes Catholic exegesis is that it deliberately places itself within the living tradition of the Church."

All Catholics can join in the process of understanding the meaning of the Scripture. It is an ongoing process of prayerful dialogue and study. Each succeeding generation raises questions about the Scriptures and keeps the dialogue going. The Preface to the Pontifical Biblical Commission states that the study of the Bible "is never finished; each age must in its own way newly seek to understand the sacred books."

In order for us to interpret Scripture correctly, we must pay attention to both what the human author wanted to say and what the Holy Spirit intended to communicate. To find out the human author's intentions, we must take into account the time and culture, the literary forms of the time, and the manner of speaking and thinking that was current then. Since the Scripture is inspired, they "must be



read and interpreted in the sacred spirit in which it was written” (*Dei Verbum*, 12). The Second Vatican Council offered three criteria for interpreting Scripture in the light of the Holy Spirit:

1. Look closely at the content and unity of the whole Scripture.
2. Read the Scripture within “the living Tradition of the whole Church.”
3. Be attentive to the analogy of Faith. This means the unity of the truths of Faith among themselves and within the whole context of God’s revelation.

Our understanding and wisdom of the Scriptures increases over time. And a compassionate God has not abandoned us *only* to the words in the Scriptures. The Holy Spirit continues to lead us through the Church. The Church teaches that there are two senses of Scripture: the literal and the spiritual.

The *literal sense* of Scripture is foundational. It refers to what the actual words directly mean, either in a precise sense (e.g., the narrative of the Passion) or in a figurative sense (e.g., a metaphor or parable).

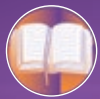
The *spiritual sense* refers to how the words of Scripture can be signs of something more profound. Understanding the Bible in this way is important for a student of the Old Testament. The spiritual sense has three parts. The allegorical sense helps us understand how some of the events of the Old Testament prefigure Christ; for example, the crossing of the Red Sea symbolizes Christ’s victory over death. The moral sense teaches us how to act in a right way. For example, Abraham’s faith obliges us to believe in Christ. The anagogical sense (from a Greek word for “leading”) helps us to relate what the events of Scripture have to do with our final destiny—Heaven.

It is the task of those who study the Bible to work according to these rules toward a better understanding and explanation of the Scripture. The Magisterium of the Church is ultimately responsible for “watching over and interpreting the Word of God” (*Dei Verbum*, 12).

Learning Some Necessary Skills

Working from the rules listed above, there are several skills that further help to study the Bible. Among these skills is a basic understanding of the original languages in which the Old Testament was written. Many languages were spoken and written in the Ancient Near East during the time of the writing of the Old Testament. Most of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew, but parts were written in Aramaic (a language very close to Hebrew, but more widely spoken among ancient peoples) and some of the later writings were written in Greek. Hebrew and Aramaic are known as “Semitic” languages. There remain a few modern Semitic languages spoken today, including Arabic or Maltese.

The grammar and vocabulary of Hebrew and Semitic languages are similar. Many of the words sound and mean the same thing. For example, the word “peace” is *shalom* in Hebrew and *salaam* in Arabic. Knowing that these



What Inspiration Means

God is the author of the Sacred Scripture. But what exactly does that mean? The Bible was not literally penned by God. It did not fall from the sky. Inspiration involves God's inspiring human authors to write the sacred words. Another Christian viewpoint is more literal, holding that the words themselves are inspired. For sake of understanding, examine critically both points of view.

If it is the *authors* who are inspired, then how can we be sure that the person fully and adequately wrote down what should have been written?

If it is merely the *words* that are inspired, then the author's importance diminishes: anybody could have written inspired words accurately—even a young child could have done it! Doesn't it matter that the writer was a spiritual person, deeply in tune with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit? Would we be satisfied to say that they acted like a robot, and just copied words "whispered in their ear" by the Holy Spirit?

Finally, just because someone *says* that a word is from God doesn't make it so! There needs to be some acknowledgement and recognition from the Church. Remember the famous question, "If a tree falls in the forest and nobody hears it, does it make a sound?" In a similar way, how can a word be inspired if nobody hears it, learns from it, and repeats it? The Church is the final part of inspiration.

- Form small groups to debate the meaning of inspiration. Share the conclusions of your group's debate with the rest of the class.

languages are related can help us to understand the culture, context, and wider political and social setting of ancient Hebrew history. In fact, serious students of the Bible learn to read Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek in order to study the Bible in its original languages.

Of course, most of us do not speak or read these original Biblical languages. We rely on translators to bring the words of the Bible to us. Today there are many different English translations of the Bible. How accurate are they? To understand the answer to this question, you need to ask yourself some analogous questions. For example, why can't scientist No. 1 announce that he has discovered the cure for cancer one day and immediately sell the cure for money the next day? Or, why couldn't scientist No. 2 claim that there is another planet in our solar system that is beyond Pluto and have her claim immediately accepted? The answer, of course, is that any scientist would have to *prove* their announcement to lots of other scientists! A discovery isn't considered real until *many* people confirm it.

Translation of the Bible is similar. There are literally hundreds of ancient manuscripts of the Bible in Greek, Hebrew, and many other ancient languages, that these translators use to compare to each other. A translation into English is never based on one or two texts in Greek and Hebrew—but *dozens and dozens* of them! It is usually pretty easy to spot single mistakes from one ancient scribe when you have over a hundred other texts of the same passage to compare.

So, not only are there many texts to work with, there are lots of people working on them simultaneously. Biblical scholars—both Catholic and Protestant—meet regularly in conferences, compare notes, argue about their ideas, and suggest new ideas. Bible translations that we use today are the results of years and years of scholarship, learning, debate, and checking. We are learning more all the time, and new discoveries give us more confidence about our translations. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947–1950, for example, helped Biblical scholars and all Christians tremendously because these scrolls were Hebrew writings of the Bible that were almost 1,000 years *older* than the Hebrew texts we had previously. The Dead Sea Scrolls helped to confirm the previous translations.

The details of Biblical translations are debated. But it would be virtually impossible for someone to suggest a wild translation and get it past all the other translators who are also working on these texts. Take, for example, the *New American Bible*, which is the translation quoted in this text. In 1943, Pope Pius XII issued an encyclical on Scripture studies. He wrote:

We ought to explain the original text which was written by the inspired author himself and has more authority and greater weight than any, even the very best, translation whether ancient or modern. This can be done all the more easily and fruitfully if the knowledge of languages be joined to a real skill in literary criticism of the same text. (*Divino afflante Spiritu*)

The text of the *New American Bible* is a completely new translation taken from the original and the oldest available sacred texts (see Preface to the *New American Bible*, Old Testament). Again, it's important to remember also that the Pope and college of bishops are ultimately responsible for not only determining the validity of a translation, but also of interpreting its words.

Another skill for serious Bible study is knowledge of other ancient writings and how they compare to the Biblical text. A large number of books that have survived from before the time of Jesus, mostly from the Hellenistic and Roman Periods (e.g., 333 BC through about AD 250) are known as the **Pseudepigrapha**. Many such books were discovered in 1945 near Naga Hamdi. These books are of considerable historical, literary, and religious interest for the study of the late

Old Testament era and early Christianity. They have long been translated into English and are readily available, and often provide us with an excellent idea of the great diversity in religious thinking in these times.

While there is nothing dangerous or secret about them (although some of them are a bit odd), the Church long ago determined that these writings were not inspired by God and could not be included in either the Old Testament or New Testament canon. It's a good idea to have a strong grounding in the Bible before launching into reading these non-Biblical materials—particularly if you want to appreciate how these other books use Biblical ideas and then go in different directions. As interesting as some of these other books are, they aren't nearly as interesting as the Bible itself. If you become a serious student of the Bible in college, this will be the time to read and analyze them.

The books that are in the canon of the Old Testament and New Testament are historically considered the inspired books of the Bible. To be inspired means that what is written in them is what God wanted to be communicated to humankind. Any interpretation of the Bible must be attentive above all to what God wants to reveal through the sacred authors. What comes from the Spirit is not fully

Pseudepigrapha

Ancient books from the same timeframe as the books of the Bible, especially the New Testament. The Church decided these books were not inspired by God and could not be included in the canon of the Bible.





Two jars that contained the Dead Sea Scrolls.

archaeology

The science of studying material remains of past human life and activities.

artifact

Something created by past humans, usually for a specific purpose (tools, pottery, clothing, etc.).

understood except by the Spirit's action. Reading the Bible, in short, is not simply an intellectual exercise, but a prayerful one as well. As the *Catechism*, quoting Luke 24:45, reminds us:

If the Scriptures are not to remain a dead letter, Christ, the eternal Word of the living God, must through the Holy Spirit "open [our] minds to understand the Scriptures." (*CCC*, 108)

Finally, for serious study of the Bible, **archaeology** is also of importance. Archaeology is both a science and an art. Imagine digging the remains of a village from Biblical times. What would you find? You might discover the lines of the foundations, perhaps some remnants of building material, possibly some gravesites, and maybe a trash dump with remnants of old broken jars and containers. That is the science part—because that is what you actually see.

What can we learn from this kind of evidence? Here is where science meets art, or in other words, where evidence meets intuition. Sometimes it is difficult to reconstruct in our minds what the buildings actually looked like, how the people lived, and what they did. For example, maybe when this ancient foundation of a village is dug up, archaeologists have many problems trying to identify the name of this particular village. Then they must search for clues.

In the Ancient Near East, it is possible that the name of the village may be found on clay tablets or papyrus scrolls. Or the Bible can help if it refers to a particular village that was in the area of the excavation. Sometimes modern local traditions may help.

Sometimes names are found on **artifacts**. For example, a discovery in Northern Israel from the early 1990s mentioned "The House of David" and an Assyrian royal carving found many decades ago famously pictures Omri, a king of Northern Israel who is mentioned in 1 Kings and 1 Chronicles. Archaeological discoveries that mention Biblical persons or places can confirm their existences, though not everything about the context of the persons or places. Archaeology and Biblical study, therefore, must always be in dialogue, because archaeological discoveries must be interpreted as much as Biblical texts.

Section in Review

Quick View

- Human authors who were inspired by God wrote the Bible.
- The Magisterium—Pope and bishops—interpret God’s Word in Scripture and Tradition.
- The Second Vatican Council suggests that when we read Scripture we keep in mind the unity of the whole Scripture, the living Tradition of the whole Church, and unity of the truths of Faith within the whole context of God’s Revelation.
- There are two senses of Scripture: the *literal sense* and the *spiritual sense*.
- Accurate and identical translations of the Old Testament from Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek are challenging, but scholars work together to create accurate translations.
- Various non-canonical books known as the Pseudepigrapha have been discovered to assist in the translation and interpretation of the Old Testament.
- The art and science of archeology offers important assistance to Biblical interpretation.

For Review

1. **Main Idea:** How do Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition function together in transmitting God’s Word?
2. **Main Idea:** Explain the literal sense and scriptural sense for understanding Scripture.
3. **Main Idea:** What does it mean to say a Biblical book is inspired?
4. **Main Idea:** List and describe three helpful skills needed in the interpretation of Scripture.
5. **Critical Thinking:** What is the ideal relationship between archaeology and Biblical study?

For Reflection

How has a passage from the Old Testament inspired you in your relationship with God? In other words, what do you think God wished to communicate to you through this Bible passage?

The organization of the Old Testament and the history of the Hebrew people shed important light on the scope of Salvation History.

Classifying and Arranging the Old Testament Books

The Jews traditionally divided the books of the Hebrew Bible into three distinct sections:

1. Law (in Hebrew, *Torah*)
2. Prophets (in Hebrew, *Neviim*)
3. Writings (in Hebrew, *Ktuvim*)

The Law consists of the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The Prophets are subdivided into the Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings), the Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel), and the Minor Prophets. The Writings include eleven books: Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Canticle of Canticles, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra/Nehemiah, and Chronicles. If you put together the first letter of the three words in Hebrew, you get the acronym “TaNaK,” which is the term often used as shorthand by modern Jews to refer to the Hebrew Bible.

The Old Testament in the *New American Bible* is arranged slightly differently, under Pentateuch (Greek for “five books”), Historical Books, Wisdom Books, and Prophetic Books. The books of the Old Testament are arranged in these categories as follows (with abbreviations):

The Pentateuch	
Genesis	Gn
Exodus	Ex
Leviticus	Lv
Numbers	Nm
Deuteronomy	Dt

The Historical Books	
Joshua	Jos
Judges	Jgs
Ruth	Ru
1 Samuel	1 Sm
2 Samuel	2 Sm
1 Kings	1 Kgs
2 Kings	2 Kgs
1 Chronicles	1 Chr
2 Chronicles	2 Chr
Ezra	Ezr
Nehemiah	Neh
Tobit	Tb
Judith	Jdt
Esther	Est
1 Maccabees	1 Mc
2 Maccabees	2 Mc

The Wisdom Books	
Job	Jb
Psalms	Ps(s)
Proverbs	Prv
Ecclesiastes	Eccl
Song of Songs	Sg
Wisdom	Wis
Sirach	Sir

The Prophetic Books	
Isaiah	Is
Jeremiah	Jer
Lamentations	Lam
Baruch	Bar
Ezekiel	Ez
Daniel	Dn
Hosea	Hos
Joel	Jl
Amos	Am
Obadiah	Ob
Jonah	Jon
Micah	Mi
Nahum	Na
Habakkuk	Hb
Zephaniah	Zep
Haggai	Hg
Zechariah	Zec
Malachi	Mal

The most important thing to keep in mind about the arrangement of the books, however, is that the Bible is *not* in chronological order. The first books are *not* necessarily the *oldest* books, and the final books are *not* necessarily the most recently written. Nor is it true that events recorded in the first books all took place before the events in the next books. For example, Leviticus and Deuteronomy both include details about Moses receiving the Ten Commandments. A reader needs to learn about history and the text in order to have a good sense of when a book was written. But there is also the certainty that many books were edited at a later time, or were combinations of other books. For example, the psalms were probably once in shorter collections before being put together to form the large collection that is the Book of Psalms today. (Catholics and Protestants have 150 Psalms; Orthodox Christians have 151 Psalms.)

Some Biblical books even quote books that are not in the Old Testament canon, for example, the “Book of the Kings of Israel” (e.g., 1 Kgs 14:19, 15:31) or the “Book of Jashar” (e.g., Jos 10:13; 2 Sm 1:18). These were likely ancient books that the Biblical authors had in front of them as they were writing their text.

So when were the books of the Old Testament written? The earliest of the Biblical books were based on oral traditions that were first written down either during the time of Solomon (around 950 BC) or perhaps between 900 and 700 BC. The latest books (especially many of the deuterocanonical books) were written, probably in Greek, around 150–100 BC.

The reason that the time of Solomon is usually cited is because it is believed that Solomon would have been the first king of Israel who actually had scribes to do some of the writing. Another school of thought is that most of the early writings come from later on—the eighth or seventh centuries BC—when there is more evidence of widespread literacy, and more evidence of royal administrations that would have kept such written records. Ancient writing required institutions, a scribal class, and not merely a few literate persons.

Most certainly, a large portion of the Bible was revised after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC. In this case the revision involved adding a revised insight to the original work. The revisions to the inspired texts do not in any way impact their sacredness. Remember, inspiration refers to what God *wanted* recorded in the Bible, including clarifying that message by editors.

To summarize, it continues to be debatable as to when different books of the Bible were actually written, edited, and began to take on the form that we have today. Of course, since many Biblical books were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, we know that much of the Bible was already in its present form by 100–200 years before the time of Jesus.

Section in Review

Quick View

- The Jews divide the Hebrew Scriptures into three distinct sections, which differs from the way Catholics arrange the book in the *New American Bible*.
- The Old Testament developed over a period of many years, and it is difficult to determine the exact date that books were written and edited.

For Review

6. **Critical Thinking:** How does the Jewish classification of the books of Hebrew Scriptures differ from the way Catholics classify the books of the Old Testament in the *New American Bible*?
7. **Main Idea:** Why is it so difficult to pinpoint when a specific Old Testament book was written?
8. **Main Idea:** Using the timeline on pages 14–15 as a guide, describe the key moments in the history of the Jerusalem Temple.
9. **Critical Thinking:** What are some common struggles that the Hebrew people experienced throughout the history of the Hebrew people depicted on pages 14–15?

For Reflection

Read the Book of Tobit. What message do you think God is giving us regarding relationships (e.g., children and parents, husbands and wives, self and God)?

Ancient Hebrew History:

A BASIC OUTLINE

APPROXIMATELY 1030 BC The beginning of the Monarchy (kings) after the period of the Judges. This is often called the “United Monarchy” because there was, for a time, only one King for all Hebrew peoples: Saul, followed by David, and finally Solomon.

1207–1208 BC Pharaoh Merneptah carved a memorial to his military campaigns in Canaan and mentions the people “Israel.” The carving is dated to 1207 or 1208. This is the first use of the word “Israel” in history. Therefore, we know that a people who called themselves “Israel” were in the land at least by 1207–1208.

APPROXIMATELY 1260 BC The exodus of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt under the leadership of Moses. The date of the Exodus cannot be certain, but is usually dated to the reign of Rameses II (1279–1212 BC).

922 BC The death of Solomon resulted in the division of the Hebrew people into two states (sometimes rivals, sometimes allies) called Judah in the south and Israel in the north.

722 BC The fall of the Northern Kingdom to the invading Assyrians from northwest Mesopotamia (in what is today modern Iraq and Syria).

640–609 BC The Reign of King Josiah. Josiah instituted what scholars call “The Deuteronomic Reforms” (because we think the Laws of Deuteronomy inspired his reform movement), and it is likely that most of the historical writings of the books of Joshua through 2 Kings (six scrolls or books) come from this period as well.

587–586 BC The final defeat of Judah by the Babylonian Empire under King Nebuchadnezzar, who deported many Judean citizens. The Jerusalem Temple built by Solomon was destroyed.



These dates represent important milestones in the history of the Hebrew people. These are especially important to introductory students of the Old Testament, as they will allow you to relate specific books of the Old Testament to specific events and time periods.

539 BC Cyrus the Persian defeats Babylon and allows some of the captive peoples to begin returning to their homelands.

520–515 BC Most probable date for the rebuilding of the destroyed Temple in Jerusalem.

CA 450 BC Approximate time of the missions of Nehemiah and Ezra, Hebrews who traveled back to Palestine from the Persian Diaspora.

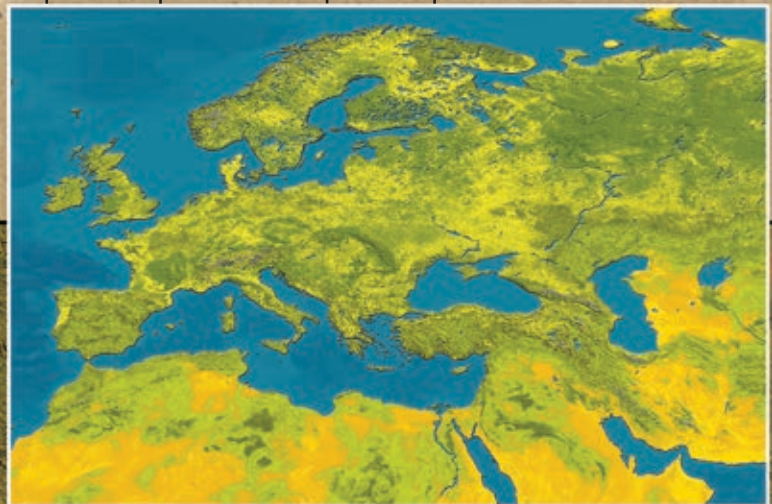
333 BC Alexander the Great's invasions of Palestine and the Near East—beginning of the influence of Hellenism (Greek culture).

167 BC Antiochus IV (Epiphanes) attempts to unite his territory through forced Hellenism. There was serious oppression of many Jews during this time. As a direct result, the Maccabean resistance breaks out, as described in the Books of Maccabees.

CA 64 BC Palestine comes under direct Roman control, although the Romans had been watching events in Palestine for some time before, and occasionally involved themselves in local disputes.

CA 6–4 BC The birth of Jesus.

AD 70 The destruction of the second Temple by the Romans and the scattering of the Jerusalem Christians mostly eastward.



The Church considers the Old Testament the inspired Word of God, useful for study, prayer, and interpretation of the New Testament.

How Important Is the Old Testament in the Life of the Church?

This is a very important question for your study of the Old Testament in the context of your course in a Catholic high school. The Church considers the Old Testament “an indispensable part of the Sacred Scripture” (CCC, 121). The Old Testament is the true Word of God. The Church has always rejected any idea that the New Testament voided the Old Testament. All of the books of the Old Testament are inspired by God and contain a great amount of teachings on God, wisdom on human life, a treasury of prayers, and a glimpse of the mystery of Salvation. The Old Testament offers a “prefiguration” of what God did in the fullness of time in the Person of his Son, Jesus Christ. This means that Christians also read the Old Testament “in the light of Christ crucified and risen” (see CCC, 128–129). This unity between the Old Testament and New Testament is based on **typology**.

As Church Father St. Augustine put it: “The New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old Testament

is unveiled in the New.” Christians read the Old Testament in light of Christ crucified and risen, but also remember that the Old Testament has “its own intrinsic value as Revelation reaffirmed by our Lord himself” (CCC, 129). When asked which was the first of all the commandments, Jesus taught those he learned from the Hebrew Scripture (see Mk 12:28–34).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* summarizes the importance of the Old Testament to the Church as taught by the Second Vatican Council:

Indeed, “the economy of the Old Testament was deliberately so oriented that it should prepare for and declare in prophecy the coming of Christ, redeemer of all men.” (CCC, 122 quoting *Dei Verbum*)

As the Church itself was foreshadowed from the beginning of creation, the Church “was prepared for in a remarkable way throughout the history of the people of Israel and by means of the Old Covenant” (*Lumen Gentium*, 2).

Studying the Old Testament: Some Final Thoughts

A final question to pose as we begin a detailed study of the Old Testament has to do with the nature of the study itself. A first truth must be acknowledged: The books of the Bible have been written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This means that, while God chose

JESUS' BIBLE

It is important to remember that when we read the Old Testament, we are sharing this book with another living faith, Judaism. The faith of the Jews is a viable and living response to God’s Revelation in the Old Testament. The Church does not believe, as some Christians unfortunately and wrongly think, that the Jews have been “rejected” or even “cursed” by God. Judaism has a unique relationship to Christianity and Christians ought to affirm Jewish response to God and indeed learn from it as a means of enriching our own faith response to God.

Jesus, after all, and most of the earliest Christians in the first generation of the Church were all Jews. As you study the Old Testament, remember that you are in effect studying “Jesus’ Bible”—it was *the* Scripture used by Jesus. We have the benefits of books later written about Jesus and quoting Jesus. But for Jesus himself and his first followers, their “Bible” is what we study in this course.



men as authors, he also instructed them in “writing everything and only those things which he wanted” (*Dei Verbum*, 11). Therefore, because the authors were inspired by the Holy Spirit, the books of the Bible “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” (*Dei Verbum*, 11).

Nevertheless, since God speaks in the Scripture through human authors, it is necessary to apply tools of **critical reading** to find out what God wants to communicate with us. What do we mean by “critical” reading of the Bible? First, critical reading does *not* mean finding faults, picking apart, or making disparaging remarks. Rather, in Biblical studies, critical reading simply means very careful examination of all the information that is at hand and thinking it through carefully. To understand the Scriptures, we must try to figure out what the authors wanted to say and what God wanted to reveal in those writings. This means paying special attention to the historical time and the culture in which the writing took place and to the literary styles the author used.

To think “critically” about the Bible, however, is by no means an easy task. This is a book that is not merely a typical human writing. The Bible is the Word of God. The Church teaches that the Word of God is “a light for our path” (a quote from Psalm 119:105), and we must study in faith and prayer to put it in practice. The Scriptures actually guide our sense of conscience and morality. The ability to deal with difficult questions raised by careful analysis is a mark of a mature belief in God, even if it means living with open questions or difficult problems. Be willing to live with questions that you are wondering about. This is a part of becoming a serious student.



If, when you begin to read the Bible, you wonder whether the Adam and Eve stories were religious parables rather than literal history, this is not an evil question. It is not necessary, for example, to believe in *historical* people named Adam and Eve in order to have a deep and abiding faith that God is the author of all creation and that the story is intended to teach profound truth.

The Old Testament remains a primary source for our faith and Catholics do well to take seriously the God who liberates slaves, unseats Kings, speaks through radical prophets, and acts within history. At this stage of your learning, let’s concentrate on learning what the Bible is actually talking about, rather than whether or not a Biblical character can be verified historically.

A serious study of the Old Testament will deepen your understanding of God and how he revealed himself over time to humankind. As the fathers of the Second Vatican Council taught:

typology

The study of types of writing that have common traits. Typology in Scripture study involves reading the Old Testament in light of Christ crucified and risen.

critical reading

A number of methods of studying the Bible that aim to discover what God is communicating—both to the people of the Bible and to people today.

And such is the force and power of the Word of God that it can serve the Church as her support and vigor and the children of the Church as strength for their faith, food for the soul, and a pure and lasting font of spiritual life. (*Dei Verbum*, 22)

Section in Review

Quick View

- The Old Testament is the inspired Word of God and not voided by the New Testament.
- “The New Testament lies hidden in the Old Testament and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New.”
- Critical reading of the Bible involves the examination of what the authors wanted to say and what God wanted to reveal.

For Review

1. **Main Idea:** How would you describe the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament?
2. **Main Idea:** What is critical reading of the Bible? What is the purpose of critical reading?
3. **Critical Thinking:** What are four reasons teens today should study the Bible with critical reading tools?

For Reflection

Read one of the following passages from the Old Testament: Psalm 42:1–12, Sirach 2:1–11, Psalm 139:1–24, or Isaiah 43:1–7. Spend some time in silence, reflecting on the meaning of the passage. Then write your own prayer based on the passage. You will have an opportunity to share your prayer with the class.

Further Reflections

The Old Testament has great value for Christians. The books of the Old Testament should be received and read with reverence. As the fathers of the Second Vatican Council teach:

Now the books of the Old Testament, in accordance with the state of mankind before the time of salvation established by Christ, reveal to all men the knowledge of God and of man and the ways in which God, just and merciful, deals with men. These books, though they also contain some things which are incomplete and temporary, nevertheless show us true divine pedagogy. These same books, then, give expression to a lively sense of God, contain a store of sublime teachings about God, sound wisdom about human life, and a wonderful treasury of prayers, and in them the mystery of our salvation is present in a hidden way. Christians should receive them with reverence. (*Dei Verbum*, 15)

As to your study of the Old Testament, in summary, there are several important reasons to pursue it:

- The books are divinely inspired.
- The Old Testament is an important part of the liturgy.
- It contains many beautiful prayers.
- It is a powerful witness to God's challenge to live in justice and compassion.

The books of the Old Testament are a testimony to the entire story of our Salvation, including a prophecy of the coming of Jesus Christ, our Redeemer, and an indication of the revolutionary meaning of his coming. The Old Testament is *essential* to a full comprehension of who Jesus is, what he taught, and what he meant in his teachings. For example, understanding the relationship of the prophets to Jesus highlights the power of Jesus' teaching on justice.

Vocabulary Review

Directions: Match the term with the description below.

archaeology **artifact** **canon** **critical reading** **deuterocanonical**
Magisterium **Pseudepigrapha** **Tradition** **typology**

1. The Church decided that these books were not inspired by God.
2. The teaching authority of the Church, which includes the Pope and college of bishops.
3. A term meaning "second canon," includes books in the Catholic Old Testament that are not in the Hebrew Bible.
4. An official list of books belonging to the Bible.
5. The living transmission of the Church's Gospel message found in the Church's teaching, life, and worship.
6. The science of studying material remains of past human life.
7. Items such as tools, pottery, clothing, etc. that were created in the past.
8. Involves reading the Old Testament in the light of the New Testament.
9. Methods of studying the Bible that aim to discover what God is communicating.

Performance Assessment Project

Imagine that you are a PhD student researching the Old Testament at a Catholic university. You are asked to develop a research proposal for the interpretation of a book in the Old Testament called the First Book of Maccabees. You must answer the following questions within the proposal:

- What type of book is this and when did its events likely take place?
- What documents, books, and tools will you consult to interpret this book?
- What types of people will you contact in the course of your study? Whose research will you consult during your study?

Write a research proposal based on these questions.

Called to Prayer

*“Fear not, I am with you;
be not dismayed; I am your God
I will strengthen you, and help you,
and uphold you with my right hand of justice.”*

—Isaiah 41:10

- **Reflection:** Think of a time when you were afraid. How would these words from God have helped you in that situation?
- **Meditation:** Read the passage over multiple times and choose one word or phrase that particularly jumps out at you today. What meaning does this word or phrase have for you at this moment? Spend a few minutes concentrating on the meaning of this word or phrase.
- **Resolution:** Is there anything in your future that is currently causing you fear and anxiety? Write this Scripture verse somewhere as a reminder that you have no need to be afraid.