

How To Read The Bible

A Practical Catholic Guide

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A WARNING?

There was once a man who decided to read the Bible. He took it down from a high shelf, blew away the dust, opened the heavy black cover, and started at the beginning. The Book of Genesis wore on and on - into confusion. Noah's ark was sailing through Eden with Abraham at the helm. The drowsy afternoon and all this confusion soon sent our friend to sleep, his head resting on a long list of names in some obscure Hebrew family tree. When he woke up, he decided that the whole attempt was worse than trying to read "War and Peace". Back on the high shelf went the Bible. Down came the dust of years.

Our friend just did not understand what the Bible is or how to approach it. The Bible is not a single book. It is a small library of books, all different, all bound within one cover. If I go to a library, I only choose books which interest me, or books which suit my own purposes. So it is when I read the Bible. I do not simply read it from cover to cover. I choose certain books which interest me, books which answer questions and meet my needs. But to find out my needs and which questions to ask, I need guidance through the Bible library. Using typical Bible readers' problems, we can come to clear answers to the complex question, "How do I read the Bible?"

I

A PRACTICAL APPROACH

How should I read?

It is wise to read very little of Scripture at a time - at least when you start regular Bible reading. It is best to read slowly, carefully, willing to refer to any notes provided as detailed explanation. If a chapter seems useless or boring, go on to the next chapter.

If possible, a regular time each day should be set aside for reading. Obviously, this is difficult in a normal working day. But when we think it out, there are "blank" times during the day which could

be used; for example, on the train going to work, after the children have gone off to school, after lunch or before going to bed.

The Bible is the inspired word of God. We therefore treat it with respect. But this does not mean binding one-self to a pious way of reading. If you want to pray before or after reading, do so. The reading may lead to prayer. If you want to read "casually," while travelling or relaxing, do so. It's up to you to decide - freely.

I find the English hard to understand. What should I do?

Change to a modern version at once. There are many good modern versions on sale today; some even set out like a novel. We share some of these new texts with our separated Brethren. The Revised Standard Version and the Jerusalem Bible are perhaps the best known modern texts. Details of modern versions on the Australian market are set out at the end of this pamphlet.

Some people appreciate traditional English. This is simply a matter of taste, temperament and background. Some of our finest literature has been formed by "Biblical English." However, there is nothing sacred about "thee", "thy", "thou" language. For some it has noble associations. For others it is a meaningless barrier.

Can I interpret the Bible for myself?

The Catholic Church encourages private Bible reading. The Second Vatican Council was quite clear on this point. "Easy access to sacred Scripture should be provided for all the Christian faithful." But in the interpretation of the Bible, the Church will not permit the domination of private opinion. There are common-sense reasons for this.

The Church compiled the Bible library. The authority of the Church had the final say in which books would be included in the Bible library, and which weird and almost forgotten books would be excluded from the Bible. Only the Church can understand and interpret her own library - a family library which is largely the story of God's People, His Church. Because the Bible only makes sense "within the family", it can never make sense when interpreted by certain religious enthusiasts who knock on your door or blast you over the radio or television.

The Church seeks to conform herself to the guidance of the Bible. But the danger of free private interpretation leaves men free to read their own meanings into the Bible, to make it suit their own opinions or theories. The result of free private interpretation is quite clear - utter chaos. Every man fights for his pet theories.

Scripture soon becomes a mine for cranks, a source of superstition, a centre of grave disunity. None of this was intended when the Church put the Bible together.

How do I find out what correct interpretation is?

Firstly, by knowing and appreciating Catholic teaching. You will never find official Catholic teachings contradicted by the Bible. But you will find your own understanding of the truths of our Faith deepened and brought to life in the pages of Scripture.

Secondly, you can follow the fine detail of interpretation by using Catholic commentaries or reading guides. Some of these are large and expensive, some highly technical, but there are others in the form of well set-out booklets or magazines, for example, The Bible Today.

The words "correct interpretation" can be misleading. The Church does not have a set interpretation for every jot and tittle of Scripture. Indeed, most of the Bible is left open for interpretation governed by the continuous research of Christian scholars, Catholic and non-Catholic. Only in areas where Scripture has been twisted against the truths of God's People do we find clear Church rulings.

Your own personal interpretation may take various forms: (a) what a passage of Scripture means, (b) how this helps my own appreciation of the Mass, Sacraments, etc., (c) how this shows me the Christian way of life, (d) how this leads me to prayer... Above all else, personal interpretation should lead to a deeper love and knowledge of Jesus Christ, and in Him to a deeper love and knowledge of others and of ourselves.

Because each of us in the Church is a member of the one altar community, personal interpretation should be balanced out by discussion with other Christians. Your parish clergy will be glad to help here, and will encourage moves to set up adult study groups. By a mature study of Scripture, Catholic Christians will find the way of genuine renewal in the modern Church.

Where do I start?

Obviously, as it is a library, you do not start at the beginning of the Bible. The Christian always starts with the second and smaller collection of books in the Bible, with the New Testament. As we shall see, this will later show him how to understand the first and larger part of the Bible, the Old Testament.

The words "New Testament" mean "God's new agreement with mankind," that is, the way he has revealed in the Person of Jesus Christ. The "Old Testament" means "God's first agreement with his chosen People, the Jews." This old agreement was replaced by Jesus Christ. It only makes sense to us as the special preparation which led up to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In these wonderful events God made an agreement with all men, and through these events he created his new People, the Church. So we are the People of the New Testament.

II THE NEW TESTAMENT UNFOLDS

Where do I start in the New Testament?

Jesus Christ is the centre of our understanding of the Bible. We see the whole Bible, Old and New Testaments, moving to a climax in his life, death and resurrection. So we should start reading, quite simply, with the life of Jesus Christ.

There are four accounts of the life of Christ in the New Testament, the four Gospels. The word "Gospel" means "Good News", that is, an account of the person and message of Jesus of Nazareth. "Gospel" does not mean "life story," so we cannot expect a complete little biography of Jesus Christ in each Gospel, although we do have many details in the Gospels of the major points in the earthly life of Christ.

Which Gospel should I choose to read first?

The shortest of the Gospels, the Gospel of St. Mark, was probably the first Gospel written. It gives a limited account of Our Lord's ministry, his death and resurrection. Because it is the basic text, written in a compact simple style, it is perhaps the Gospel to read first. The reader will note how it only gives a vague picture of the personality of Our Lord, although the author goes into detail concerning the miraculous powers of this "Son of man".

To fill out a clearer picture of the personality of Our Lord, read the Gospels of Matthew and Luke after reading Mark. Matthew's Gospel is the most Jewish of the four Gospels. It gives some details of the Birth of Our Lord, his detailed teachings and a pattern for the structure of the Church and its discipline - the role of St. Peter as the first Pope.

St. Luke's Gospel is a delight to read. Here is the closest Gospel to a rich biography of Jesus Christ. The ancient traditions of his conception and Birth are set out in the first two chapters. Luke etches a beautiful picture of the majestic and loving character of Christ. He also enjoys telling the parables of Jesus (his teaching stories) with all the zest and eye for detail of the skilled Eastern story teller.

Where do I go from here?

Luke wrote a sequel to his Gospel, the Acts of the Apostles. You will notice that he addressed this sequel to the same man to whom he also addressed his Gospel, a man named Theophilus. So we pass over the unique Gospel of St. John for the time being, and we proceed to the Acts of the Apostles, addressed to one whose name means "He who loves God."

In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke shows how the "Good News" of Jesus Christ passed from Jerusalem to Rome. Here we have a vivid reconstruction of the growth and life of the earliest Church. You will note the central role of St. Peter, and then how the theme of Acts changes to follow the missionary adventures of the famous convert, St. Paul. Readers who find these journeys of interest will refer to maps provided at the back of many Bibles.

Research has shown that the details of Paul's journeys are very accurate. Tradition tells us that Luke accompanied Paul on the missionary journeys, acting as his physician.

By now you will have gained two basic insights of the New Testament: (1) You will have a deeper sense of the Personality and mind of Jesus Christ, a sharper understanding that he is God's direct intervention into history - our Saviour, our purpose, our destiny; (2) You will appreciate the Gospels as Church books, as inspired literature written within the Church founded by Jesus Christ, literature which only has a full meaning within that same authentic and continuous Catholic Church. The Acts of the Apostles will have shown you the young Catholic Church in action.

Why is St. John's Gospel so different from the other three?

The first three Gospels are known as the "Synoptics" (seeing together) because they have much material in common. St. John's Gospel is different. He only gives us a limited account of the details of Christ's life, gathering in memories and traditions of Jesus which we do not find in the other Gospels.

However, as you read John, you will find the rich symbolism and profound meditations of the mind of a great theologian. You will discover the most sublime of the Gospels, an endless source for personal meditation and prayer.

John was concerned to give us an accurate vision of Jesus as the eternal Son of God, as God enfleshed in our world as a Man. In his beautiful, but difficult, first chapter (the "Prologue") John sets out the themes of Jesus as "The Word", his gifts of light, grace, truth and life. John goes on to use the miracles of Jesus to show us how God acts, making a special feature of the water, wine and bread of the Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist. John shows us what Jesus means to us now, what his teaching gives us now, our sharing in the Sacraments of the one Fold.

It is perhaps best to follow the reading of John's Gospel with a study of his three letters, which you will find after the letters ("epistles") of St. Paul and St. Peter. In his letters, John develops the Love of God, showing how it must grow as the bond of truth and unity between all believers, for "God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him." 1 John 4: 16.

Were the Gospels written separately?

By now you will have noticed how there are many passages which we find repeated in different Gospels. It certainly looks as if Mark, Matthew and Luke were aware of one another's writing and did not hesitate to borrow or copy from one another. Just how the Gospels relate to one another is a problem which scholars have never solved exactly, although there are many theories about how they came to be written and why we find the same texts repeated in the three versions of the "Good News" known as the Synoptics. The average reader of the Bible need not worry about these academic matters, although some readers may be led out of interest to study the problem in a commentary or companion text.

You should read the four Gospels, not primarily to follow textual problems, but to come to know Christ better. Even as you go on to other books in the Bible library, you will find yourself returning again and again to the clarity and simplicity of the living Christ as He is expressed by His Gospel writers.

The Second Vatican Council affirmed, "Holy Mother Church has firmly and with absolute constancy held, and continues to hold, that the four Gospels just named, whose historical character the Church unhesitatingly asserts, faithfully hand on what Jesus Christ, while living among men, really did and taught for their eternal salvation until the day He was taken up into heaven."

How do I read and understand the writings of St Paul?

The letters of St. Paul are often quite difficult to understand. They are the earliest writings of the New Testament in many cases, written well before the Gospels took their final form. They are letters directed to the Church which compiled the Gospels. They are the product of a sophisticated Christian mind, written originally in Greek. Obviously, Paul must be read in a clear, modern version of the New Testament.

Paul's elaborate style of writing, the way he moves about from point to point rapidly, requires great care in reading - and frequent reference to footnotes or a good simple commentary. Even a few verses of Paul may be enough to read at a time, certainly in some of his longer letters.

To understand and appreciate St. Paul, several points must always be borne in mind. Paul is writing to early Christian communities with their own peculiar problems and customs. At times these problems relate to the sort of problem we may experience in a modern parish. At times we could get into strife by trying to use Paul to provide dogmatic answers to modern parish questions. Paul does not cover every aspect of the Faith. He is silent in many areas because particular problems had not yet arisen in these areas, so we cannot treat Paul as the last word in all areas of theology.

Paul himself was very careful to point out when he was giving advice or opinions and when was laying down the Law of Christ. Paul must never be quoted out of context, and we may never try and exaggerate one element in his rich and varied theology to exclude other elements.

Where do I start with Paul?

Galatians would be the best epistle to introduce St. Paul. It is short. The problems concerning Paul and the Christians of Galatia are clear. Paul provides us with some autobiographical detail, to be compared with details in the Acts of the Apostles, written much later.

Paul's two letters to the Corinthian Christians show us the problems of an early Christian community - factions, snobs, heretics and gossips. It is evidence that the early Church had just the same human problems as the Church today, evidence which soon dispels the fantasy of a perfect early Church. The first letter to the Corinthians is notable for its references to the Eucharist and above all for St. Paul's glorious meditation on love (chapter 13).

The Epistle to the Romans is the central letter of Paul, containing his dynamic doctrine of God's action which alone saves man. Romans is difficult to understand at times, but very rewarding in the vision it gives us of the central role of the gift of Faith in our salvation. To balance out the letter to the Romans, exaggerated by some Christians, it is best to read the much later Epistle of St. James. This will give you a balanced view of the place of good deeds and moral life in Christian salvation.

From Romans, which takes time to appreciate, you can move to a "lighter" letter of Paul, the beautiful Epistle to the Ephesians. The fifth chapter of Ephesians, on marriage and the Church, is perhaps one of the finest parts of the New Testament. If you go on to read the Epistle to the Colossians, you will see how it gives much of the doctrine of Ephesians. Some have argued that Ephesians was not really written by Paul, but put together from pieces of his genuine letter to the Colossians. As with the Gospels, there are many academic theories about Paul's letters, and again some readers may be interested in the detective work of this area of study.

Paul's letters to the Thessalonians and the Philippians are words of guidance and encouragement to struggling Church communities. The later letters to Timothy, Titus and Philemon are moving indications of Paul's personality in his last years as a "prisoner for Jesus Christ."

Did Paul write the Epistle to the Hebrews?

No. [Or at least, probably not.] We do not know who wrote this remarkable letter which comes after the collected letters of St. Paul. [perhaps someone in Paul's immediate circle?] The Epistle to the Hebrews is a majestic Jewish Christian document which gives us the concept of Christ's High Priesthood. Read carefully, with a good commentary, it can help you understand something of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Indeed, some have argued that it is really a series of sermons written for use at Mass in the early Church. There are various links between John's writings and the letter to the Hebrews. The eleventh chapter, on Faith, will be useful as a guide to our reading of the Old Testament when we come to it in due course.

The remaining letters collected in the New Testament are the two Epistles of St. Peter and the Epistle of St. Jude. The two letters from the first of the Popes show us the early Church and its problems from the point of view of the man who inherited Christ's authority in the apostolic circle. St. Peter reminds us that we are a "royal priesthood", warning us of false prophets and the last days of the world. The small letter of St. Jude is a complicated and obscure document, with pointed reference to sinners and trouble makers.

What is the Book of Revelation?

The Book of Daniel in the Old Testament and the Book of Revelation in the New Testament are the most terribly misinterpreted portions of the Bible. The Revelation (or "Apocalypse" - derived from Greek) has always been a mine for cranks and heretics, fanatics who have dug down to ludicrous

conflicting theories and claims which modern scholars have shown to be complete nonsense. The early Church saw the dangers in this book and indeed hesitated before adding it to our Bible. But the doctrine contained in the strange book of Revelation is sound, often written in beautiful forms and symbols.

The Revelation which came to an early Christian named John is described as a series of visions, symbols and images, all pointing to the place of the Church in the history of the First Century and to the future of the Church in terms of our eternal destiny. You cannot read Revelation without a detailed Catholic commentary or guide. A good commentary will explain how various mysterious symbols are really a code for people and events in the ancient Roman Empire. Unfortunately, cranks have seen these symbols as a magic key to the past, present and future, a sort of historical "prophecy" code. The same cranks also misuse the text of the Book of Daniel, on which much of the Revelation is based.

Revelation is a good point to settle once and for all one of the worse abuses of the Bible - attempts to use the Bible to predict the end of the world. The Church will not allow this folly and dangerous superstition, for of the end of the world Jesus Christ said plainly, "But of that day or that hour no one knows..." (Mark13: 32). The warning not to find exact world prophecy applies to all the Bible. Christians do believe that God works out his purposes in history - salvation history. Some Christians may believe, as personal opinion, that this is the "last age" of the world. But we cannot go beyond this private opinion to fine details, fantastic claims and fearful exact predictions. It is certain that the author of Revelation did not intend his readers to misuse his symbolism in this fashion.

Read Revelation with an eye to its beauty and truth. See the splendid symbolism of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass - the Lamb slain eternally, the altar, the throne, the apostles, the incense - all the symbols of our liturgy. See the vision of the woman crowned and robed with the sun - Our Lady and the Church. See the vision of heaven as the eucharistic banquet, the supper of the Lamb, the symbol of our eternal and indescribable destiny. Above all, listen to the cry which closes the New Testament, that theme so clear in our renewed liturgy, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

III EXPLORING THE OLD TESTAMENT

The last book of the New Testament will have left you looking into the future, to the coming of Christ, to the completion of all time and all purposes. But again and again your reading of the New Testament has pointed back to the first People God gathered together as the focus of his plan for the world, to the Jews. We call the Jewish Bible the "Old Testament", the old agreement between God and men. We believe that it has been superseded by the New Testament, by the new agreement in Jesus Christ and his Church. But we have a reverence for the Old Testament and we include it as an essential part of our whole Bible.

But why read the Old Testament? Isn't the New Testament enough?

Obviously the New Testament is "enough" insofar as it gives us the words and acts of Jesus Christ, the God-Man. But because Jesus Christ was a Jew, a religious Jew, a Man living, thinking, speaking and acting as a Jew, we cannot understand his place in history or much of his teaching unless we go back to the great saga of the Jews, back to the Old Testament.

When we do this, we find that God had been preparing for Birth of His Son. He gathered together a People. He led them to a promised land. He remained true to them even when they disobeyed Him

and fell into disaster and slavery. Ultimately, He brought His chosen People to a single perfect point, to one woman, the chosen Jewess who became the Mother of God.

In this Old Testament saga we can see our God as the God of history. The whole story of man centres on the Jews, the old Israel, then on the Church, the new Israel. It is "salvation history". Your reading of the New Testament points to this meaning of human history, to God's purposes in human lives and national histories. But when we look back, this story is not complete, indeed it cannot be told, unless we know and understand the Old Testament.

God in the Old Testament seems different from God in the New Testament. Why is this?

Reading the Old Testament, you will discover a God who seems jealous, cruel, warlike and demanding. But within the Old Testament you will also find the same loving, patient and gentle God revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Why are there these different views of God in the one book?

First, we remember that the Old Testament is not one book. It is the sacred library of Jewish literature. Some of its books are history, others are poetry, theology, philosophy, folk-lore, legends and prophecy. These books were written at many different times by many different people. They reflect many different views of God. But gradually they develop towards a Christian doctrine of God. The primitive view of God as a warlike tribal God fades away. The Jews learned that God is the God of the whole universe, the kind and merciful God who has a steadfast love for his People, Israel.

When we come across the primitive ideas of God in the Old Testament, we must not pass judgement on those who had these limited notions. Many people today have notions of God which are quite as limited and crude.

Why is God called "Yahweh" in some versions of the Old Testament?

Some modern versions give the ancient title of God as "Yahweh". Others give this simply as "the Lord" or "God". The name Yahweh is quite mysterious. Some argue that it means "I am" or "I am because I am". Others claim that it means "I cause to be" or "I make things happen". Some even claim that it means "I blow", i.e. "I am the God of storms". It is an ancient and holy name for God. It is perhaps rather confusing when used in Christian liturgy. But it reminds us of the Jewish basis of our Faith.

Where do I start reading in the Old Testament?

Perhaps the clearest approach to the Old Testament is to start with the history of God's own People. We can begin this quite simply with the first book in the whole Bible, the Book of Genesis. This is the first book in the five most sacred books of the Old Testament, the "Pentateuch". The other four books of the Pentateuch are Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

Genesis was put together from many pieces of tradition. You will read first the glorious description of the creation of the world, the creation of Adam and Eve, and the tragedy of the Fall. "Genesis" means "the beginning". The creation story is not a scientific account of how God made the world. It is concerned to convey the facts that God created man in his own Image and that man rebelled and fell, passing on to all his descendants the evil tendency of Original Sin. Christ came to restore the fallen nature of man.

To understand Genesis properly, to appreciate its wise analysis of human nature, we need to use a good guide book, for example, Frank Sheed's *Genesis Regained*.

Genesis goes on to trace out the age of the fathers (the "patriarchs") the story of the call of Abraham, "our father in faith", the ancestor of God's own People. We see the chosen tribes learning more and more of the God who guides their destiny.

What does "Exodus" mean?

The word "Exodus" refers to the journey out of Egypt after God's People were delivered from slavery under the leadership of Moses. In the Book of Exodus we examine the dramatic salvation act of God which is recalled in our Easter ceremonies. Once free, the chosen People received the Law of God, the Ten Commandments.

The Book of Leviticus need not hold your attention on your first reading of the Bible. It concerns the ceremonial of the old priesthood. You may skim over many sections of the Book of Numbers, leaving out long lists of tribes and families, perhaps following the adventures of Moses in the desert wandering. Come back to these parts when you are doing deeper research.

The sober Book of Deuteronomy ("second law book") is the record of a much later reform of Israel's religion. It follows a series of sermons given by Moses before his death. You will find in it a rational re-statement of God's Law and God's promises. Blended into it is a detailed code of social law, borrowed largely from neighbouring nations. The key idea behind the book is "covenant", an agreement in legal terms and obligations between God and His own People.

Were these historical books written at the time they describe?

Many scholars today answer.. No. Many traditions in them were written at the time the events happened, or at least put into songs or poems in the tribes. But it was not until much later that the books took their present forms.

As you follow the history beyond the five books of the Pentateuch, you will find more detailed human records of events. The Books of Joshua and Judges show us God's People taking possession of their promised land and settling into it. At this point read the small Book of Ruth, set in those early days. Here is a romantic human story of love and faithfulness.

The stirring age of Israel's high history is found in the four Books of the Kings, known as the two Books of Samuel and the two Books of the Kings. Saul, David and Solomon raise Israel to royal glory. Then the nation splits, idolatry creeps back again and stronger neighbours close in on the divided People.

What was the Captivity?

In the eight centuries before Christ was born, the Jews suffered defeat and humiliation under the hand of five great empires: Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece and finally Rome. About six hundred years before Christ the Jews were taken off to Babylon as prisoners and virtual slaves. In the captivity experience the Jews found a renewal of their faith. The Books of the Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah centre on this experience and events which came after it. Other books with stories from the Assyrian and Persian eras are the Books of Tobit (Tobias), Judith and Esther. The story of Queen Esther is a beautiful account of heroic fortitude.

The last great oppression of God's People before the Roman occupation was that under the Greek empire. The two Books of the Maccabees will give you the stirring story of the Jewish resistance movement, with moving accounts of martyrdom and faith. In terms of history, these books bring us to the closest point between the Old Testament and the New Testament

Where is the poetry of the Old Testament?

The Book of the Psalms is the central collection of the sacred poetry of Israel, hymns from the great temple ceremonies, poems and prayers of personal devotion. You may choose to read the psalms in a separate text, for example the Fontana edition. Many of the psalms will be familiar to you through the texts we use at Mass. They are also used in the Divine Office, said or sung by clergy and religious. The psalms burst with life and rich emotion. For many they are the most precious and living verses of the whole Old Testament.

The Song of Solomon ("Song of Songs") is a poetic book of great beauty. It is a love poem which is open to many different interpretations, as a romantic poem of physical love or as a symbolic poem of the Love of God.

Who are the "prophets"?

Some of the finest reading in the Old Testament is found in the various books of the prophets. The word "prophet" has many meanings, but generally refers to an inspired representative of God, a man called by God to remind his People of their past and future. Some of the small books written by a prophet or his disciples are of limited interest, but the great prophets of Israel still speak to us today. A good commentary or footnotes will tell you when the particular prophet lived or taught.

Perhaps the greatest of the prophets was Isaiah. Today we know that the great book of Isaiah really falls into three sections, perhaps even written by three different men. 'First Isaiah', chapters 1 to 40, is notable for the great vision of the Lord God in chapter 6. 'Second Isaiah', chapters 40 to 56, contains the mysterious Servant Songs, which Christians see as a prophecy of Jesus Christ and his sufferings. 'Third Isaiah', chapters 56 to 66, some scholars think, was written after the great captivity, and comes to a climax in chapter 61, read by Our Lord when he began his ministry. (Luke 4: 16-30).

Why are some of the prophets so odd?

There are some strange actions and words recorded in some of the prophetic books. Jeremiah was quite an eccentric. He went so far as to act out in strange behaviour the fate that would come to God's People if they continued their idolatry and immorality.

Ezekial had visions and used harsh and shocking symbolism to drive home his message of disaster for God's wayward People. In Amos we find a man rather bewildered at the fact that God had seized hold of him and made him a prophet. Hosea used his own grim marriage experience to point out the unfaithful ways of God's People.

We are well aware that these were remarkable men, at times 'fanatics', but within their writings are moments of clear doctrine which speaks to modern man. Hosea's marriage experience would be the perfect advice for people involved in grave marriage problems. It speaks of "steadfast love" and constant forgiveness. Chapters 30 and 31 of Jeremiah speak in terms of hope for the future, of a "new covenant". The small Book of Malachi refers to a coming universal sacrifice, to be offered "from the rising of the sun to its setting...", a reference which Christians have seen as applying to the Mass.

What is the "Wisdom literature"?

After the dramatic tone of the prophets, you will prefer to turn to the quieter books known as "Wisdom literature". These were written by wise scribes, attached to a royal court or to the temple.

Much of their wisdom is not couched in religious language. They show us the philosophy of the Jews, their reflections on life and its purpose.

There is great beauty and Christian meaning in the way the Book of Proverbs turns wisdom into a symbolic person. You may think of the Church or Our Lady as you read through the homely or profound sayings of Proverbs and the Wisdom of Solomon. In the Book of Ecclesiastes (or the Preacher) you will find a clear rational mind at work, at times bitter over the "vanity" of life, yet capable of the great poem of chapter 3, ". . . a time to be born, and a time to die...". The homely adages of Sirach (or Ecclesiasticus) show a more practical and less subtle approach to life.

Of all the books in the Bible the most difficult and disturbing, in my opinion, is the Book of Job. Set in the days of the patriarchs, but apparently written later in its final form, Job approaches the problem of suffering in terms of God and man. Does he provide an answer? You will not be able to see the answer unless you persevere with Job. You will need a commentary or notes to read Job, and then the whole book may prove tiresome. In the end it will be rewarding. Some have started by disliking Job intensely, but ultimately seeing it as the cream of the Old Testament.

For Christians, Job has a special meaning because of the interpretation we read into Job 19: 25, "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at last he will stand upon the earth..."

IV THE BIBLE IN MY LIFE

We have covered generally the most important areas of the Bible. Even if you only decide to read a few books of the New Testament you will find that life takes on a new meaning. Certain obvious effects may be predicted.

Firstly, the readings you hear at Mass will start to come alive. You will be thinking on the same "wave-length" as the men who wrote those readings and psalms. This must overflow into your private prayer. Your knowledge of Jesus Christ as a real and tangible Person will deepen. Your reverence for God's plan in history and in each life will increase.

But don't I have to be clever for all this?

No. The person who comes to the Bible with "clever" ideas is liable to stumble. However, the Bible in practical terms can only improve the way we think, write and speak, for it opens to us a wonderful range of language and expressions. Not only has the Bible helped form our English language, it is also central in the life of music, painting, sculpture and architecture. Just look around carefully and you will be surprised at the truth of this observation.

There is a deeper knowledge available to the Bible reader. This is a discerning wisdom, gradually acquired. No-one can open the writings of Paul or the Wisdom literature without learning more of human nature, our common dignity and weakness. In this we may learn more of the art of loving, caring and sharing.

Has family Bible reading a place today?

Certainly - but let it be introduced with great care. Scripture must never be imposed on anyone. The "Bible basher" is a terrible bore. In the home he can damage the faith of children. But short, well chosen and simple Bible readings should find a place in the Catholic family.

The admirable practice of the family rosary has faded in many homes. Nothing has replaced it. At least from time to time a short Bible reading could fill the need for family devotion. It could also

supplement the family rosary, where this continues. On major feast days a family Bible reading could become one of those customs of the Christian home which do so much to build up the Faith.

As well as the crucifix or statue, a gift of a Bible should come from parents and god-parents. Special children's Bibles or Bible readers and excellent modern biblical picture books are on sale today. The best way to supplement and help the catechetical formation of our children is to open to them the vivid stories of the great heroes of the Bible. They should be as familiar with David, Paul, Samson and Moses as they are with the depraved 'heroes' presented on television.

After all this, why read the Bible?

This last question is quite simple. But it has a thousand answers, even apart from the many practical benefits of Bible reading mentioned above.

The Church compiled the Bible library to be read with true understanding. The Bible is really a mirror. In it we see ourselves, for the chosen People who live and move in Scripture are the same People of which we form a part today. Their pilgrimage is ours, in all its struggle, agony, joy and victory. Before this great tapestry of their glorious witness we may feel humble, yet grateful. But all this colour and movement is nothing compared with the majestic act of God's salvation in Jesus Christ. For us, He remains the personal centre of the Church library, its one purpose, its beginning and its end.

Reading the Bible, each of us is confronted again and again with this Person, crucified and risen for our salvation. His free gift of salvation will become the converting reality of our life's journey. We will happily claim the words of those excited disciples who encountered the risen Lord on the Emmaus road:

"Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?"

A GUIDE TO ENGLISH EDITIONS OF THE BIBLE

The books of the Bible were written in several languages - Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic. There have been many English versions, becoming more and more accurate as modern scholarship has advanced.

Two factors should guide the Catholic in choosing a good version for private reading: (1) the authority of the Church, (2) personal tastes and understanding.

CATHOLIC EDITIONS

The Revised Standard Version (Catholic Edition) (RSVCE): a clear, simple and accurate modern version, slightly adapted from the RSV Protestant edition of 1946, thus an ecumenical text. Hard cover or paperback editions. New Testament may be bought separately.

The Jerusalem Bible (JB) : a fine version based on a French Bible, in two editions: (i) a scholars' text with complete footnotes, (ii) a readers' edition with less detailed footnotes. The New Testament may be bought separately. This is generally a more complicated and less accurate translation than the Revised Standard Version, but valuable for its footnotes and clear setting out. Used in Australia for the Liturgy.

Knox: a beautiful translation by the late Msgr. Ronald Knox, favoured by some for private reading, not suitable for reading aloud because of its Latin-style of English prose. Hard cover and paperback.

Douai-Rheims: the well-known traditional Catholic edition, for those who appreciate traditional English.

Confraternity: an American edition, not common in Australia but found occasionally in prayer books and missals.

NON-CATHOLIC EDITIONS

The Revised Standard Version: from which came the Catholic edition which is almost identical with the RSV.

The Authorized Version (AV) : also known as "The King James Version", the great English Bible of 1611, famous for its prose style, but often difficult to understand and at times not accurate.

The Revised Version (RV): a conservative revision of the King James Version, made in 1881, dull style but accurate for scholars.

The New English Bible (NEB) : an excellent modern version, fully published in 1970. New Testament obtainable separately and especially good as an edition of St. Paul.

Good News For Modern Man: an American New Testament in paperback form, perhaps the best modern text for clear understanding. Now available as a complete Bible.

J. B. Phillips: a fine prose translation of the New Testament.

EDITIONS TO BE AVOIDED

The "translation" prepared by Jehovah's Witnesses, the New World version is very inaccurate. Two well-prepared versions, the Moffatt and Barclay editions of the New Testament, show deliberate interpretations read into the text, for example of the eucharistic words of Our Lord.

BIBLE COMMENTARIES

The serious reader who wishes to pursue close study of the Bible should use the Catholic Commentary, the Jerome Biblical Commentary or the New Catholic Commentary, together with J. McKenzie's Dictionary of the Bible. Of non-Catholic commentaries, the best is the new edition of Peake. These commentaries provide reading lists of current studies in the theology and analysis of Scripture.

Nihil Obstat: BERNARD O'CONNOR, Diocesan Censor. Imprimatur: + J. R. KNOX, Archbishop of Melbourne. 8th September, 1970
