

Treasures Old & New
The Bible as the Heart of our Faith

An Introduction to Understanding the Bible



Insights from various biblical authors and scholars on:

- The Formation of the Bible: From Experience to Expression through Story
- The Bible and History
- The Bible as ‘the word of God.’
- The Truth of the Bible.
- The Bible: an open book that speaks with a diversity of voices and invites us into a critical dialogue.
- What the scriptures say of themselves.

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THE PROCESS OF FORMATION OF THE SCRIPTURES

From Experience to Expression

- THE BIBLE: A DOCUMENT ROOTED IN THE EXPERIENCE OF A PEOPLE.

A single presumption or presupposition underlies the whole bible: God is real and can be experienced. The basic conviction throughout the scriptures is that God chooses to reveal God-self in history and in the world and so is to be discovered and experienced in the 'bits and pieces of everyday life.' Revelation is God's outreach; it is a generous invitation from God inviting us to discover who God is. Revelation is God saying: 'Here I am. This is who I am' and inviting us to relationship.

This experience of "the sacred," "the holy," the mystery that we call "God" however goes beyond the limits of language and shatters and relativises it. The experience is such that it can never be fully described. Nevertheless, the experience is such that one wishes, indeed, one feels compelled, to share it. The Bible is essentially the attempt of two communities [the people of Israel and the early Christian community] to communicate their experience of God and to respond to it. The divine nature is revealed initially through events and experiences: the words come later, as the community begins to reflect on and to understand the significance of the event.

Two considerations are important.

- Firstly, *we do not have direct access to the actual experiences* underlying these stories. We have access only to how that experience has been interpreted, reinterpreted and transmitted within the collective memory of the people in light of their lived experiences and circumstances. The text, as it has come down to us, has experienced several layers of interpretation.
- Secondly, those who record the tradition do so because they have convictions about the past and the present and want to communicate their beliefs. The bible is not a neutral document. It is written with a very specific purpose and intention: namely to strengthen and deepen the faith of the audience. It is written by people of faith for people of faith. St John explicitly acknowledges such a purpose towards the end of his gospel:

John 20:31 But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

The author's primary concern is with the present and not with the past. The writer uses stories of the past not so much to inform his/her audience of what actually happened in the past but rather to form and shape their views in the present. They do not present us with objective detached reporting or accurate memory, nor were they intended to. Their intention is to express their own developing awareness of who God is and what God means for believers and the world. Before all else the bible is made up of faith documents: they were written by people of faith for people of faith. They make no bones about the fact they are partisan. The Bible is propaganda, it is a faith document written intentionally to encourage and deepen the faith of the listener.

- STEPS IN THE PROCESS (STAGES IN FORMATION OF THE BIBLE)
 - I. Experience of God / Divine Revelation
 - II. Experience is reflected upon and interpreted by the community of faith.
 - III. This tradition is transmitted to subsequent generations and interpreted and reinterpreted in the light of their own experience.
 - IV. Different traditions are gathered together.
 - V. Collections are brought together and recorded in writing.
 - VI. Over the following centuries the community selects which texts it regards as authoritative for the faith life of the community ... process of canonisation.

With respect to the above stages of formation of the Bible it is important to remember:

During the stages of **oral tradition**, [Stages II – IV], the tradition remains fluid and dynamic. It is only when the traditions are committed to writing that they are ‘frozen’ in a fixed or definitive form. These stories evolved over a period of more than a thousand years before they were written down. They were told and retold from one generation to the next long before they were committed to writing. Just as our own way of thinking matures and develops as we go through life, so also Israel’s thinking about God matured and changed through history. For example in the most ancient biblical traditions, prosperity was considered a sign of God’s blessing and suffering as a sign of God’s displeasure or punishment. It was only when the people of Israel began to mature and reflect on their experience (for example, in the Book of Job) that they began to question the supposition because they saw in their own experience that good and upright people also suffered misfortune. So we see the people of Israel gradually evolving and maturing in their image of God. They were willing to recognise the shortcomings of previous ideas that they had previously held and adapt and correct them according to their own developing experience and reflection.

The evolving and developing relationship between a child and a parent offers a useful analogy for understanding the developing awareness of God that we find in the Bible. Imagine when you were five years old someone asked you to describe your parents. Perhaps you would have answered (or you did!) that your mother was very loving and the world’s best cook and that your father was very strong (more so than your friend’s father) and that together your parents took good care of you. Now imagine you are sixteen. Would the answers be the same? Or at age thirty. Would your answers be the same? You might use some of the same words (love, strength, care) but they would have a deeper meaning. Which of them would be correct? It would be a mistake to disregard the five-year old’s description or to accept it as the last word. Important discoveries, both positive and negative, await the person willing to see the full picture. Perhaps for example you admired your father for being able to handle every situation, but later you realized that what may have seemed heroic as a child seems ruthless as an adult. Over the years the traits we admire in a person may appear in a new perspective – either positively or negatively. The scriptures reveal a similar developing awareness of God. The Bible is a record of people called into a long relationship of learning about themselves and God. In the record of that relationship, the early expressions of it are still preserved however much later experiences contradicted or moved beyond them. Most parts of the Bible have been through a long process of editing as one generation after another brought to bear on their own circumstances the traditions that they received from their ancestors. Yet they valued the traditions handed down to them so highly that they preserved the earlier reflections while often modifying them.

When the different traditions are brought together [Stages IV and V] no effort is made to harmonise these traditions or to edit out differences. Therefore the bible speaks with a rich diversity of voices.

From Experience to Expression through Story.

How is this experience of divine revelation brought to expression? How is this experience articulated. Primarily through story and images.

The Christian tradition, as well as many other religious traditions, is rich in storytelling. Christ didn't give theological lectures so much as he told stories.

Matthew 13:34 Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing.

In doing so he was following the long biblical tradition of using stories as a window through which to glimpse the meaning of life. In much of the Bible, both the Old and New Testament, we are presented with stories that provoke, challenge and reveal. These stories are formative: they are about who we are.

Passing wisdom on through stories is a tradition as old as language itself. Great spiritual masters from every culture and time have relied on stories to do their teaching. Common folks have also used stories as a way of passing on wisdom, and these folktales and biographical stories are equally valuable sources of inspiration and learning. Some wisdom stories are told in a simple, straightforward manner. Others speak in metaphor or are shrouded in symbolism. Some stories seek to shake us out of a logical way of thinking so that we might be opened to new understandings. Stories have many layers of meaning. We will take from them what we need and are ready for at the time.

But why does wisdom so often come in the form of stories? The author Anthony de Mello tells of a master who always gave his teachings in parables and stories, much to the frustration of his disciples, who longed for something more to ease their understanding. To their objections the master would answer, "You have yet to understand my dears, that the shortest distance between truth and a human being is a story."

(Doorways to the Soul, Elisa Davy Pearmain. ed.)

The Bible and History

Much of the scriptures is taken up with writings that strike us, at first reading, as history. But they are history in a unique sense of the word. The authors are more interested in the significance of the events rather than the events themselves. Both dimensions are necessary for sacred history to be revelation. Unless an event occurred there could be no significance. But without the significance, the events cannot function to reveal God's nature. They tell the story in such a way that its significance for them was brought out. They were more concerned about its meaning than about its details.

An important factor that must be taken into account with regard to stories is that they are almost invariably told with the benefit of hindsight. Our present experience colours, influences and brings out the meaning of the stories of the past. That's because what is in the past has run its course, so to speak, and only now is fully apparent. In the words of William Bausch: "the present tends to "read back" into the past the potential that has blossomed." [William J. Bausch, *In the beginning there were stories: Thoughts about the oral tradition of the Bible*].

In this respect, it is important to remember that the Gospels and other New Testament documents are written in the light of the Resurrection and of the disciple's Easter

experience of new life in Jesus. Though there is considerable historical memory enshrined in the texts ... they do not count as historical writings in the modern sense. They were written to proclaim faith in the risen Jesus present in the Christian community and in the lives of the disciples, not to document the story of his life as a modern historian might do. (Thomas Rausch, *Who is Jesus?*)

The early Church sought to preserve the essence of Jesus' life and teaching. Yet we must acknowledge that we do not always have an account of his exact deeds and words. What we do have is the impact they made that goes back to his actual words and deeds. Speaking of the differing accounts in the gospels of Jesus' words at the Last Supper and the different forms of the Lord's Prayer and the Beatitudes, John Meier reminds us that:

The early church was interested in preserving the substance, the essence, the core message of what Jesus said, not the exact wording. In that, the evangelists operated like many an historian in the ancient world: nobody told the evangelists that they had to operate like twentieth-century historians instead.

If we see the evangelists as storytellers who retell the Jesus tale so as to bring out their own understanding of who Jesus was and his significance for the audience, if we remember that we are reading the gospel [good news] of Jesus Christ *according to* Luke, or *according to* Mark, or *according to* Matthew, then we are less likely to be tripped up by the differences or contradictions or incorrect details. Rather than merely fixating on the facts, we allow the story to communicate whatever it is trying to convey about that incredible man from Nazareth.

Whether there were angels or just the woman herself and her husband, when that child was born the whole course of history changed ... This is what Matthew and Luke were trying to say in the stories about how he was born, and this is the truth that no language seems too miraculous to them to convey. This is the only truth that matters, and the wise men, the shepherds, the star are important only as ways of pointing to this truth. (Frederick Buechner, *The Hungering Dark*)

The Bible as 'the Word of God.'

What do we mean when we say that the Bible is the 'Word of God?' There are, it appears, four possible interpretations of what we mean by saying that the Bible is the 'word of God'

- a) God wrote the Bible Himself/Herself.
- b) God dictated the Bible word for word and so it is literally 'the word of God.'
- c) The Bible writers had an 'experience' or revelation of God and they tried to describe that experience. God and human involvement but in different and distinct stages.
- d) God guides and inspires the authors of the Bible to understand and articulate God's self-revelation in the life and history of the people. Involves divine/human co-operation throughout the process.

The last of the interpretations mentioned above, that of divine-human co-operation, is what the Church means when it says that the Bible is inspired by the Holy Spirit. By '**inspiration**' we mean that:

"The Holy Spirit worked by inspiration – by giving insights, by endowing human beings with wisdom, by enabling them to understand the significance of God's presence to his people, by prompting them to write."

Raymond E. Brown, one of the leading biblical scholars of recent times, suggests that if we wish to understand what we mean when we say the Bible is the 'word of God', it is useful to examine each part of the term separately: 'word' and 'God'. He begins with *the 'God' part of the description*.

What is being said is that this body of work comes from God, or is related to God in a unique way ... and constitutes a record of God's dealings with Israel and the Early Church. The Bible preserves this basic experience of the divine that can serve as a guide to the subsequent people of God.

If we turn to *the 'word' part of the description*, we are allowing that there is a human element in the Bible. People speak words and these words transmit people's interpretation of their experience of the divine in their life and history. How does God influence these words? A fundamentalist or literalist approach assumes that God dictates these words. The greater degree to which one allows a true human composition and choice of these words, the more that one recognises the truly divine and the truly human in the Scriptures. If we take the literalist viewpoint that every word comes from God then we must accept that every statement in the Bible must be literally true. The more that one allows for a truly human element in the Scriptures, the more that one can allow for limitations of knowledge, and at times, errors. Viewed in this light, the notion of inspiration can more be fully appreciated.

Inspiration does not make everything history: There can be inspired poetry, inspired drama, inspired legend, inspired fiction. If the Book of Jonah is a parable and not history, then God's inspiration makes it an inspired parable. The truth that it conveys about God's desire to bring all nations to recognise God's name and to a moral way of life is a truth that we can accept as God's inspired word for us. Inspiration does not mean that we have to believe that a historical figure named Jonah was swallowed by a large fish. We would have to deal with the factuality of that only if Jonah were inspired history. Similarly, if the first chapters of Genesis are not viewed as scientific but as religious lore or legend, we would still believe in the creation of the world by God as the inspired truth conveyed by those chapters. We would not however have to accept the Genesis description as a scientific account of the origins of the world. It could be that the author learned from the imaginary of his/her own people and of other people that were then used to convey the truth that he was really interested in, namely that God is sovereign of all and creator of the universe.

Raymond E. Brown, *Responses to 101 Questions on the Bible*
(London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990) pages 31-32.

When we read the Bible our ***primary interest is in discovering the theological truth contained therein***; that is to say, what this particular story can us about God on the basis of how the Godhead has chosen to reveal himself/herself in and through the experience of the people of Israel and the early church.

The challenge of the teacher or preacher is to weak a middle ground between affirming that everything in the bible happened literally and suggesting that it is just a story. It is a story in which God's inspired truth is communicated to us.

Raymond E. Brown, *Responses to 101 Questions on the Bible* pages 34.

Sandra Schneiders, another biblical scholar, explains it in slightly different terms. She speaks of Sacred Scripture offering "***human witness to divine reality***". Because of this divine character it has the capacity to draw us into the life of God. Because it is a human witness we have to accept all

the limitations inherent in any human witness (cultural, historical, linguistic, etc.) However despite these limitations and flaws, it continues to be a witness to divine reality and to be truly revelatory for believers, enabling us to become more truly the People of God in our world.

Sandra Schneiders, "Biblical Foundations of Spirituality" in *Scripture as the Soul of Theology*, ed. Edward J. Mahoney (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2005) pp. 1-22

The Truth of the Bible

How then are we to approach the question of truth in the Bible? Can we say that the Bible is true? If so, in what sense? Can we have confidence in the reliability of the Bible?

Speaking of divine revelation, the Second Vatican Council stated in 1965 that:

The books of Scripture firmly, faithfully and without error teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures.

Dei Verbum §11

It is significant that this statement does not make any claim about the 'historical truth' of the gospels. Indeed, the term is never mentioned. Instead Vatican II speaks of 'that truth which God, for the sake of salvation, wished to see confided in the sacred scriptures' or 'the perennial theological value of the Gospels.'

In summary, belief in the truthfulness of the gospels comes down to the affirmation that, in its dominant theological and anthropological themes (that is to say in what it teaches about God, humankind and the meaning of life) the Bible does not deceive us but offers a reliable, trustworthy guide for our spiritual journey.

The truthfulness and reliability of a particular passage in the Bible always concerns primarily its underlying religious intention as opposed to any historical assertion it might make. The truth of the gospel does not make everything reported in the gospel fact. For example, the book of Jonah is a wonderfully crafted story. But most scholars agree that this story has all the characteristics of a parable or even a satire: just like Gulliver's Travels it is a creative commentary on its own society and their attitudes. If we read it as history rather than satire, then we are likely to miss the point. Equally the fact that some incidents may not actually have happened as described in the Bible does not undermine their theological truth for the believer.

Though much of the Bible seems to consist of historical stories and narratives, it is not history in the modern sense of the word in terms of accurate detached reporting of facts and events as they actually occurred. But if we view these narratives primarily as sacred stories that draw on history, all be it very loosely at times, and remember that this was the author's primary intention, then we must look behind the facts, whether they are accurate or distorted or rearranged, and come back to our fundamental question, which is not 'What does it say?' but, What does it mean? Why does, this story, factual or embellished, exist, to begin with? What is it trying to tell the group for whom it is meant?

When we approach the Bible as HIS-STORY rather than history, we learn to read it as God intended it to be read, a story in and through which the nature of God is revealed.

The Unity of the Scriptures.

Vatican II alerts us the dangers of isolating particular texts from the rest of scripture and invites us be attentive to the content and the unity of the whole of scripture. (*Dei Verbum* §12). Jerome Murphy O' Connor reminds us that if we wish to seek the truth of the Bible we will do well to remember that:

*The truth of the verse is in the chapter;
the truth of the chapter is in the book;
the truth of the book is in the whole of the Bible.*

We must be careful therefore when making claims about what the Bible says: it is often more accurate to say “This biblical passage in [Isaiah, Amos, Acts of the Apostles, etc.] says rather than saying that the Bible says” The bible is not a collection of proof texts for a course on doctrine: it is an inspired record of the faith experience of our ancestors in faith.

The Bible is not a closed book

In bringing together the written collection of these traditions which came to be known as the Bible, neither Israel nor the early Christian community was saying that only here in these books, does God speak to us. Rather these books are a reminder of the many ways in which God has “spoken” and are therefore an invitation to recognise how God may still speak to the faith community. One of the most interesting features of the Bible is the way in which the writers felt free to reinterpret the traditions of the past and even to challenge them in the light of present-day experience. The Bible is fixed but revelation is dynamic and ongoing.

The Bible: A book that speaks with a rich diversity of voices.

Instead of promoting a doctrinally rigid view of the divine-human relationship, different biblical authors offer a wide range of religious perceptions from the absolute certainty of divine justice in human history advocated in Deuteronomy to a critical questioning of such a theory in The Book of Job and the wisdom literature. The rich diversity of individual voices speaking to us in both the Hebrew bible and the New Testament is an intrinsic part of their enduring value. To grasp the importance of the diversity it is important to allow each individual biblical writer to speak for himself without trying to force one author's statements to conform to those of another. Only by recognising the multiplicity of viewpoints raised in the scriptures will readers begin to appreciate its power to illuminate the many dimensions and varieties of religious experience.

The Bible: An Invitation to a Critical Dialogue

The Bible constitutes our primary text as a community of faith. Vatican II insisted that ‘all of Christian life should be nourished and ruled by scripture.’ [*Dei Verbum* §21]. Because the Bible is a human product as well as sacred scripture the dialogue needs to be a critical conversation. There are parts of the Bible that we will decide need not and should not be honoured, either because we discern they were relevant to ancient times but not our own or we discern that they were never in fact the will of God.

But critical dialogue with the Bible implies not simply that we make discerning judgments about the texts. It also means that we allow the texts to shape and judge us. We must be willing to hear what the text has to say to us and not simply absorb the text into what we already think.

What the scriptures say about themselves?

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. *Psalms 119:105*

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. *2 Tim 3:16:17*

So also, our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures. *2 Peter 3:15-16*

Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. *2 Peter 1:20-21*

RECOMMENDED READING:

The Gift of Scripture: A Teaching Document of the Bishops' Conferences of England and Wales, and of Scotland. CTS [The Catholic Truth Society] 2005.

To see many of the principles and insights about the Bible outlined in these notes applied to a particular text, Raymond Brown's brief study of the Christmas Stories in the Bible offers an excellent starting point.

Raymond E. Brown, *An Adult Christ at Christmas: Essays on the Three Biblical Christmas Stories Matthew 2 and Luke 2.* Liturgical Press, 1978.

For a general reference book that presents the background to the Bible and its formation as well as a short introduction to each book, both in terms of content and context, Stephen L. Harris' '*Understanding the Bible*' offers a very clear and coherent presentation to help you read the Bible.

Stephen L. Harris, *Understanding the Bible*, 7th ed. Mc-Graw Hill Publishers 2007.