



## SCRIPTURE: A Narrative

Scripture and Tradition are considered foundational pillars of the Catholic Church. Christian Scripture is the story of people of faith expressed in two volumes commonly called the Old Testament and the New Testament. The term “Old” does not mean “superseded” it means primary, basic, foundational and essential. Within these two testaments many books have been collated because they were considered important for understanding the relationship between God and humanity. This collection of books is called a *canon*. The Christian Bible passes on something about the identity, beliefs, and priorities of people; from ancient Hebrew times, the time of Jesus and life in the early Church. These texts are the basis of making meaning for those who follow Christ. Inspired by God, the Bible is a human text written by scribes at a particular time and for a particular context. Some think the books are set out in chronological order according to timing of events, however, this is not the case. The oldest material in the Bible is probably parts of the Psalms, not Genesis.

A literal reading of Scripture persisted for many hundreds of years in the Catholic Church until Vatican II documents made it clear that biblical scholarship was vital for proper understanding. Scripture cannot be “used” to prove a human scientific idea, nor to satisfy a personal human desire, because this reduces Scripture to so much less than it is, and reduces the mystery of the Triune God to mere human level. Catholics are called to look for the religious truth within the text rather than scientific facts. For example, we do not read the Genesis accounts in a literal way but as a myth that expresses something about God and something about our relationship with God, each other and the natural world.

### The Old Testament

If we want to understand Jesus as the *new covenant* (a solemn promise, pledge, agreement or bond), the promised one of God, the Messiah, we need to consider the covenantal origins recorded in Old Testament books. God is present among the people of Israel as a powerful God, a merciful God, a just God, and a holy God calling the people to be faithful to what God wanted through a deep understanding and acceptance that they are people of the covenant.

All Christian denominations share the ancient Hebrew Scriptures that Christians call the Old Testament, but Catholics have an extra seven books in their canon compared to other Christian denominations (these adhere to the Hebrew canon). The extra seven books are called the *deuterocanonical* books, that is, *the books of the second collection*. In the Catholic canon there are forty-six books that make up the Old Testament and these contain a variety of literary genres including poetry, songs, letters, allegories, historical sagas and more. The different books are gathered into four groups in the Catholic canon:

1. The Pentateuch (Greek for five rolls or books). Also known in Judaism as the Torah (Hebrew for Law).
2. The Historical Books
3. The Wisdom Literature
4. The Prophetic Books

The Old Testament is shaped by the history of the Hebrew people. It is a saga of immense proportions containing a rich tapestry of events and people that bring to life their struggle to remain faithful to God. The creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2 are like a curtain raiser for what is to follow, a cosmic backdrop to the story about God’s relationship with the Hebrew people. A people who saw themselves as the chosen ones of God and whose stories are told from this perspective.

The stories about the Hebrew people and their relationship with God began as oral tales and, through liturgical traditions passed from generation to generation. They were eventually recorded, sorted, and re-sorted over a long period of time. They were taken up again and again when new circumstances required their retelling and reformulation until the stories arrived in the form we know today.

We can understand something about oral tradition by looking to our own experience of important family stories that are passed on to the next generation. Or perhaps, like those in Wisdom Literature, we have wise sayings

filled with common sense advice and teaching that we may hear from our grandparents. The Hebrew people were exiled in Babylon for about fifty years (around 500 BCE) and this greatly stimulated the need to gather and reorder their story to preserve their identity. They were God's people since the time of Abraham, so stories were organised to reflect this important understanding.

Response to Scripture in any given context, in any given age, is important. God invites and the response is up to the individual. The Old Testament is about the people of God failing to be "righteous", about the results of their actions, about God's forgiveness and about God's covenants with them. Stories about the great prophets and patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, are part of the fabric of the story. It's about the many battles and exilic hardships including the Hebrew exodus from Egypt which had a profound effect on shaping Israel as a nation. The Pentateuch books, particularly Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, provide insight into how they saw themselves as God's promised ones. God delivered them from slavery in Egypt, made a covenant on Sinai, led them through the desert and finally brought them into the Promised Land. These books provide instructions on how they should act and worship. We can read about their laws, even down to the size and set up for the tent to house the Ark of the Covenant.

Through the eyes of the Hebrew people, Christians may learn more about God. God always keeps a covenantal promise as demonstrated in the Exodus event, the covenant with Noah and others, and culminating in Jesus, God's promised one, the Saviour. God fulfilled the covenantal promise when Jesus came among humanity. Jesus, fully human and fully divine, is the embodiment of the Old Testament covenantal promise. Today, Christians reflect on these ancient stories as they provide an understanding of the complexities of relationships and the various responses to God's invitation. Some things such as greed for wealth remain constant no matter the context. For example, we can look at what Amos has to say about social sin, theft and injustice and consider where we might see this today. Where do we find shattered or broken relationships between humanity and God, between peoples of every nation? How do we show respect for the dignity of the human person?

### **The New Testament**

An awareness of Jesus' Jewish heritage is essential for us to understand the Gospels; Jesus was a Jew who knew the Torah very well, a scholar of the Torah who refers to images and words used in the Hebrew texts. Therefore, the New Testament writers who record the story of Jesus and his fledgling Church make many connections to the Old Testament. Like the Old Testament, some of the stories of Jesus began in an oral tradition that was passed on from eyewitnesses and finally recorded. Therefore, the New Testament texts emerged from the lived experience of the believers.

The New Testament books were written sometime between the middle of the first century to the early to middle of the second century. The earliest New Testament documents are the Letters, probably Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians, (possibly dated in the year 40CE), or possibly that of James around the same time. The earliest Gospel is believed by most scholars to have been Mark's in the mid-to-late 60CE; and the latest Gospel is probably John's around 90 CE (though scholars differ on this, as on so much else!). There is no general agreement about which New Testament document is the most recent, although the Book of Revelation was the last to be accepted as canonical.

The term Gospel is from an old English word, Godspel: *god* or 'good' plus *spel* - 'story' or 'message' from a Greek/Latin derivative. As faith documents they are designed to inform and strengthen the beliefs of the early followers of Jesus. These beliefs centred on Jesus as Son of God, Lord, and Messiah. The Gospel writers begin with the assumption that their readers share with them the belief that Jesus was crucified, was raised from the dead and is exalted in glory with God, and that he will come at the end-time to judge the world. The Gospels were not intended to be put into the hands of outsiders so they are not constructed to convince the non-believer. As a rule of thumb it is well to remember that: ***The Gospels are faith documents written by believers for believers.***

Gospel writers that we name Mark, Matthew, Luke and John gathered the stories and memories about Jesus and wrote accounts of his life and ministry, his death and resurrection. Each of these accounts were written for specific groups of Christians as an aid to their faith. Therefore, each Gospel provides a unique portrait of Jesus. The Gospels were intended to be read by the people of a particular Christian community, with particular contextual issues and concerns, therefore, the selection and meaning of some episodes would have been affected by their particular situation. We call the Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke Synoptic Gospels. They have similarities in their structure and content. We can find some similar language and themes in the Gospels which leads scholars to suggest that Mark was written first and both Matthew and Luke borrowed from Mark's

writing then added to it with unknown sources peculiar to their own community. John's Gospel is much more theological in its approach to themes and content. The very early Church had to come to terms with the mystery of Jesus. For example, they had to consider why the second coming of Jesus was delayed and the mystery of Jesus' humanity and divinity.

We can discover something about the early Church in the Acts of the Apostles which is regarded as a continuation of Luke's Gospel as it has been authored by the same writer. Acts gives us an insight into the struggles of the early Church, the gradual movement away from Judaism and the missionary movement across the known world.

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