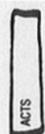


Mark: (A.D. 64-65) — The earliest written record, Mark's gospel is also the shortest and perhaps the easiest to read, in a vivid, racy narrative style. Mark is concerned to present Jesus as the Suffering Messiah, in whose life the cross is central, as it is in God's plan of salvation. *The miracle stories in chapter 2 make good reading.*

Luke: (A.D. 68-70) — Written by a well-educated Gentile (i.e. non-Jewish) convert, this gospel draws on Mark's work, as well as other sources such as those related to the Mother of Jesus. Luke stresses the relevance of Jesus' good news for all — for Gentiles as well as Jews, for the professionally religious and for ordinary people. Jesus is presented as the central figure in the story of salvation, rooted in the Old Testament and reaching forward to all time and places. *The story of the prodigal son (in Chapter 15) would make a good starting point.*

John: (A.D. 98-99) — Quite different in style and purpose from the other three gospels, the fourth evangelist stresses the divinity of Jesus as Word of God. The mission entrusted to him by the Father is constantly in Jesus' awareness: he is the light of the world, shining in the darkness for all genuine seekers to walk by. *The prologue (1: 1-14) with which it opens is wonderfully poetic and profound.*



Acts:

(A.D. 68-70) — Having completed his account of the earthly life of Jesus, the author of Luke continued his story to cover the establishment of the Church and the work of the great apostles. The Acts of the Apostles has been described as "the gospel of the Holy Spirit": under the Spirit's guidance, Peter and Paul in particular carried the message of salvation to the centre of the then known world: Rome. *The story of Paul's shipwreck in Chapter 27 is a vivid piece of writing.*



Paul's Letters:

Written, for the most part, before the gospels, these letters to farflung Christian communities give us an insight into what life must have been like for the early Christians, as well as glimpses of the rich relationship between Paul and his "Lord". There are passages of practical instruction for dealing with local pastoral problems (for instance, set right some unseemly behaviour at the assemblies in Corinth, in the *first letter to that city, Chapter 2*; and deeply prayerful passages in which we can still share, such as that in *Ephesians Chapter 3*. There are passages of almost mystical intensity, such as the *poem in Colossians, Chapter 1*; and intimate personal appeals like the *letter to Philemon* to accompany the return of a runaway slave.

Hebrews: (A.D. 67) — Though it was once included among Paul's letters, this is neither by Paul nor is it strictly speaking a letter. It is more of a sermon or a theological dissertation, written to Christians who were perhaps hankering to return to the Judaism they had left: this would explain its preoccupation with the Old Testament, and its presentation of Christ as the eternal, heavenly high priest. *The closing lines of Chapter 4 speak eloquently of this aspect of Jesus.*



Letters from others:

A number of short letters (some of them more like homilies) have been ascribed to others among the apostolic leaders: two to Peter, three to John, and one each to James and Jude. Amongst their abundant good advice, *James' denunciation of an over-busy tongue (Chapter 3) is still timely.*



Revelation:

(A.D. 96-98): Towards the end of the first century A.D., the last work to be included in the New Testament appeared. The Books of Revelation (in Greek the "Apocalypse") was the work of a Christian prophet with the fairly common name of John — not, Biblical scholars tell us, the "beloved disciple" of Jesus. It is a strange and rather unwieldy book, beginning with a series of short letters to each of seven Asian churches, accounts of vision — some of destruction, some of an ultimate consummation in blessedness — and all expressed in an elaborate network of Old Testament allusions, indirect contemporary references and far-reaching symbolism. *The description of the opening vision (Chapter 1), or that of the "New Jerusalem" in Chapter 21 are perhaps indicative passages to give an idea of the whole.*

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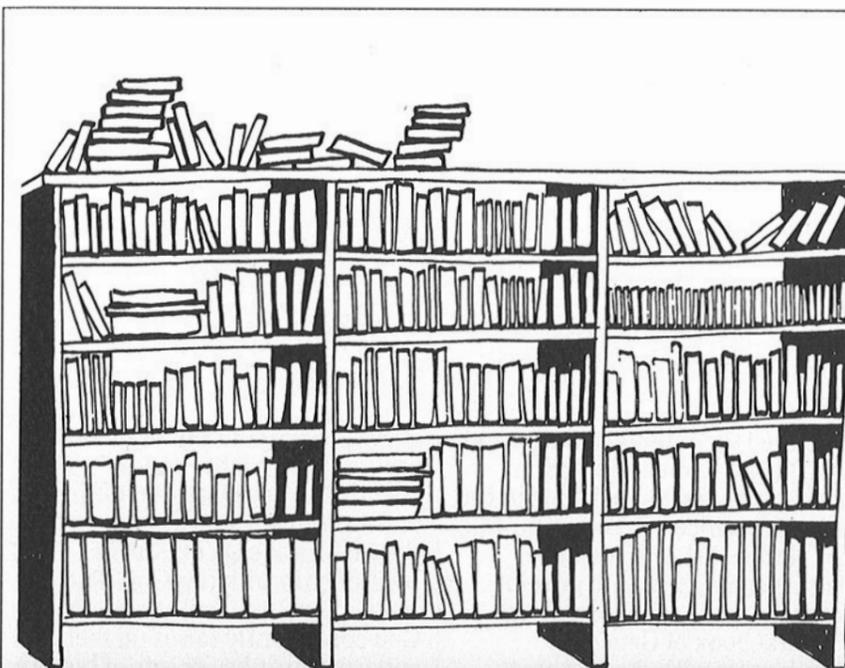
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THE BIBLE: A GUIDE THROUGH THE LIBRARY

Sr. Gretchen Kelly rscj

We are accustomed to speaking of the Bible in the singular, just as we are used to hearing it quoted, quite often, in the rich and sonorous language of 17th Century English. But it is at once older than Christianity, and as young as yesterday, with a beauty and coherence deeper and more sustaining than any one passage.

Walk with us through this fascinating library. We have made a few suggestions — for you to experience the uniqueness of this timeless source of wisdom and insight.

Whatever else may be said of the Bible, nobody who has really read it would ever call it dull. It is crowded with colour, imagination and human experience. It can also be a bewildering book, because in it so many voices are speaking. They are speaking for themselves, and speaking for obscure men and women all over the world and in every century. The very variety ensures that somewhere all will hear their own voice.

In this issue, we attempt to provide a quick overview of this extraordinary book, hoping to meet a need born of interest and curiosity.

The Vatican II Constitution "On Revelation", (1965) encouraged Catholics to give closer attention to the Bible.

"Since God speaks in sacred Scripture through men in human fashion, the interpreter of sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wants to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words."

Catholic biblical scholars have produced a wealth of scholarly and popular studies of the Bible. Translation into modern languages is encouraged; the Old Testament is accorded its rightful place as Scripture; bishops and clergy are exhorted to preach on Scripture and to see to it that opportunities for study of the Bible are made available to the faithful. Scripture study is one of the most frequently requested topics in adult education surveys. Clearly, the Council's decree hit on a need in the Church.

One of the most impressive aspects of the Bible is its amazing

The Old Testament



Law

Sacred Jewish Books called 'The Torah'



History

with a strong theological bias



Wisdom

Poetry, Song, Proverb, etc



Major Prophets



Minor Prophets

organisation. Contrary to what many people believe or simply take for granted, the Bible did not fall from heaven completely written from Genesis to Revelation. In fact, even the most summary analysis shows that it was written by over 40 different people during a period of 1600 years! A brief description of the arrangement of the various books can be helpful to people who are approaching the Bible for the first time.

regulated the religious, moral and social life of Israel is located in these books, most obviously in the laws of sacrifice, ritual purification and holiness (Leviticus), the Mosaic code, feasts and general religious duties (Deuteronomy). The first book of Genesis commences with the two great stories of Creation. *Open up the Bible and read them again in Chapters 1 and 2.*

shown above contain much of the written form of this history — God leading his people to the fulfilment of his promises. Here is spelt out the historical saga of Israel's relationship with her God. The stories continue to illustrate how God consistently raises up men and women at key points of history to shape the story of the Hebrew people.

From among the wealth of stories, try that of the Call of Samuel (1 Samuel 3: 1-11) & the short Book of Ruth.



The Old Testament

The first five books of the Bible occupy a special place in biblical literature. Most scholars hold that these books, sometimes called the "Pentateuch" (or "five books"), are made up of written documents dating from the 9th to the 4th centuries B.C. They include some of the most cherished Jewish stories, including Abraham turning his back on his ancestral home in response to God's call, the settlement of his descendants in Egypt, and their still later descendants' escape through the desert and return to the "Promised Land". The Jewish Torah which

History:

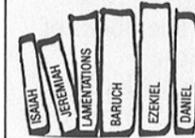
About the year 1000 B.C., two hundred and fifty years after the escape from Egypt under the leadership of Moses, David became King, based at Hebron in the southern highlands of Israel. This was a turning-point in the story of the Israelite people. Now they were to become a nation, the most powerful small nation in the Middle East. King David captured an old Canaanite fortress called Jerusalem, and made it his new capital. At his court, for the first time, reports were drawn up of the story of this remarkable rise to power and nationhood. The sixteen Old Testament books



Wisdom:

Wise men, as well as prophets and priests, played their part in the life of the people of God. These wise men, writers of the books of wisdom listed above, were not philosophers (as in Greece), but askers of questions — some sceptical, like the author of Ecclesiastes, many deeply religious, like the author of the book of Job, or beautifully poetic like the authors of the psalms. Writers from Egypt, Assyria and Mesopotamia all produced a richness in proverbs, fables and

poems. The Jewish wisdom literature treats the meaning of life, not by appealing to principles of philosophy, but from within the melting-pot of human experience. *You can get a taste of this writing in the book of Wisdom, where it describes the early death of a good person, in Chapter 4.*



Major Prophets:

Traditionally, the books of the prophets are divided into "major" and "minor" categories, not as an indication of their significance, but simply in reference to the length of the books.

For a thousand years at least there had been people in the Middle East who were known as prophets. The word 'prophet' itself probably means a spokesperson. Prophets spoke for the god they worshipped. The prophets of the Old Testament went far beyond this popular Middle Eastern religious notion. They were new and original figures; they looked beyond their own nation to the world of nations, and they spoke out of their own intimate experience of God, with a freshness and directness which had not been felt before — and which moves us still.

The story of the rise and fall of the people of Israel is one of constantly recurring brutality and destruction. From the time they escaped from Egypt to the time when, their cities in ruins and their political independence destroyed, they faced their darkest hour — through all that stormy history, their prophets stood with them, to speak for God. It was a group called the "great" prophets who played an essential role in giving meaning to this time. Strong and faith-filled, they stood above the panic of their contemporaries. They looked the real world in the face and refused to be intimidated by what must have seemed to others overwhelming human disaster.

Jeremiah, caught up in the siege and fall of Jerusalem itself, illustrates the part each played in his turn. *Read the account of God calling the young Jeremiah in Chapter 1.*



Minor Prophets:

The "minor" prophets played a similar role, but their utterances are shorter, often more particularised to their historical situation, and hence less dramatically weighted with meaning. While each has its own unique message, for the newcomer to the literature of the prophets, *Amos would be an exciting and interesting book to start with.*

and the final Book of Revelation. The dating of some of these texts is still doubtful; the dates we suggest are included only to help the reader locate them generally in time.



Gospels:

Matthew: (A.D. 68-70) — This gospel was written for a particular audience — that of a Christian community composed largely of converts from Judaism. Jesus is presented as the new Moses (law giver), and a direct descendant of David (king); in him all the ancient prophecies find fulfilment

The New Testament



Gospels:



History:

with a strong theological bias



Paul's Letters:



Other Letters:



Revelation:

The New Testament:

We now enter the section of the "library" known as the New Testament. This is made up of the four gospels, followed by another historical narrative, the Acts of the Apostles; then a number of letters

(Messiah). The major unifying theme is that of the promised "kingdom". *Try reading, in Matthew's chapter 13, the vivid description, in parable form, of what this kingdom is like.*