

Memories, reflections, stories and signposts



Approaching the Topic

Does your family have a treasured photo album, or perhaps a box of writings from relatives of previous generations? If so, then you know how illuminating these documents can be in capturing something of the life of your family heritage. While every moment may not be recorded in historical detail, the photos and letters certainly portray the highlight and carry a 'sense' of your family's values and roots. They are precious reflections of your own identity, and they show you the way forward as you endeavour to pass on to future generations the unique values that distinguish you as a family. This analogy helps us to understand a little of what the scriptures (the Bible) means to our Church community. They are the records of our ancestors in faith, retelling their experience of God in human history.

The word 'bible' comes from a Greek word meaning 'books'. The bible is not one book but a whole library, for it consists of 73 books written over a period of about 1600 years.

It was originally written in three ancient languages, Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, and many authors of varying backgrounds have contributed to it including labourers, scholars and mighty kings. At first glance it might appear to be a hotch-potch of history, scraps of battle songs, poems, family trees, legal codes, plays, short stories, prophecies, political speeches and sermons. But, through closer examination one can trace a unifying thread: the unfolding story of God's plan for the salvation of humankind.

The bible is divided into two parts called the Old Testament and the New Testament.

A testament or a covenant is an agreement, an understanding between two parties.

The Old Testament relates the promises of a loving God to the Jews, the Chosen people of Israel. In return, the Jews promised to live in accordance to the truths that they received. Hence the Old Testament was written by the community of faith who preceded the birth of the Christian Church and who are, to this day, an important part of its ancestry.

Opening the 'old' books...

The beginning of the Jewish people

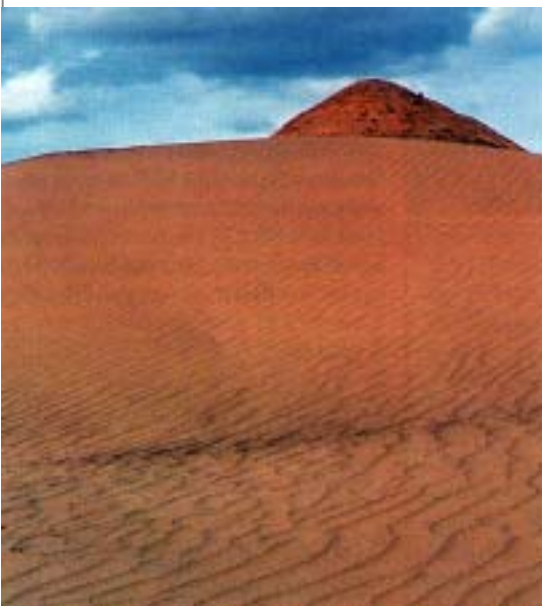
Hundreds of years before Christ, in a little corner of the Middle East, God called a man named Abraham to leave his homeland and go to a new land. There God promised to favour and guard him and his descendants and make them great and numerous if they honoured and obeyed God. Abraham's wife was called Sarah. They were at first a group of Semitic tribes wandering about Palestine. Then famine drove them into Egypt. There they became rich

and numerous, but under later kings who disliked the Semitic people, they were treated as slaves. The book of Exodus tells how God raised up the great prophet Moses to lead them out of Egypt, across the Sinai desert back to their own land.

(For the full story of this 'great escape', open the Book of Exodus at Chapter 3...)

A new nation develops

At Mt Sinai in the desert they witnessed a terrifying display of divine power in thunder, lightning and eruptions of the mountain. They gathered in awe below while Moses went up the mountain to be alone with God. There he was given a deeper insight into the nature of God. Through Moses God gave the people a set of laws. A short summary of these laws, the Ten Commandments, were engraved on two tablets of stone. The people



promised to serve the one, true God and keep his commandments, and God promised to be faithful to them. The covenant was sealed through the blood of an animal. Thus the people ceased to be a band of runaway slaves and marched bravely under God's guidance and protection to take possession of their own land, Israel, with its own rulers, laws and place of worship.

(See Chapter 19 & 20 of Exodus)

Far from being a collection of 'dead' precepts, the bible captures the lively reflections of a people on a Spirit-led journey through life

Prophets and kings, ups and downs

As life went on, the Chosen people continued to receive help from God through kings and prophets raised up to guide them. The greatest of their kings was David, who lived about 1000BC. Under David's leadership, the Israelite people became a small but powerful nation. Its capital was Jerusalem.

Through inspired preachers, called 'prophets' (the word means 'spokesperson'), the people of Israel received an even deeper understanding of their God. Prophets had the gift to look beyond their own nation and see its place in the wider world. They spoke out of their own intimate experience of God, with a freshness and directness. At times the prophets rebuked the people for practising the vices of pagan nations, reminding them of the God whom they had promised to serve. The prophets, too, were a source of

consolation during the storm periods of Israel's history when the small nation suffered invasions from neighbouring kingdoms. They had an ability and a strength of character to stand firm in the face of impending disaster and to see beyond it to a better day.

(The story of how God called one great – through initially reluctant – prophet is in the first chapter of Jeremiah.)

The People of the Book

Catholics believe that, as God's revealed word, the scriptures do not stand on their own. They must be interpreted in light of tradition, that is, the ongoing life of the Church community since the time of Christ. Let us return to the analogy with which we began this leaflet: if some strangers from outside your family opened up one of your photo albums or read one of your treasured letters, they would not reap as full an understanding of their meaning as you have. Since you are a descendent of this family, you will have picked up the innuendos and stories behind the photos. Through the knowledge and values osmotically instilled during your upbringing, you are personally affected by the spirit behind them. To understand what the photographs and letters are really getting at, the stranger would need to see them through your 'eyes'. Similarly, to understand Scripture properly, it must be read within the context of the faith community from where it came.

Not a 'what' but a 'who'

Scripture is the 'book of the Church', not only in origin and in handing on, but in its purpose. It is intended to join us to one another, and be the inspiration that causes us to become more responsive to one another as a community of believers. Scripture cannot be taken in isolation from the people who created it and the people to whom it calls us. The Catholic approach to scripture carries with it a sense of 'us'. Questions such as 'What does this passage mean to me?' or 'How is God speaking to me through God's word?' always presuppose a deeper question: 'What does this passage mean to us as a community?' 'How are these words calling me into a deeper relationship with God's people?'

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Getting it down on paper...

About 587BC, the Babylonians conquered the Israelites, destroying their Temple and forcing many of them into captivity. Even in exile, however, the Jewish people continued to believe in their God and to yearn for their homeland. Although their nation appeared dead, their faith remained alive in their hearts. And God continued to speak to them through prophets like Ezekiel and Habakkuk.

When the Persians conquered Babylon, a party of zealous Israelites came home and began rebuilding Jerusalem and the Temple under the leadership of Ezra. Ezra was a Scribe, a writer who studied and copied the ancient sacred writings, and he impressed upon the people that these words must be preserved. A school of Scribes was established, which became a permanent institution. Gradually they put together the Old Testament as we have it today. They recorded stories about the beginnings of the human race as we find in Genesis. They collected the thoughts and meditations of wise men in the book of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. They wrote down events in the reigns of Kings as in the book of Chronicles, and recorded stories which were a mixture of history and theological reflection as in the books of Ruth, Job and Esther.

(The Book of Ruth, which is only four chapters long, tells the touching story of a Moabite woman, an 'outsider' to the Jewish people who, not only joined them, but showed them what fidelity was about.)

A collection of hymns, the book of Psalms, was also compiled. These beautiful songs express the joys, hopes and sorrows of the human heart as it turns towards God. (For a sample, try Psalm 62). Likewise, the Song of Songs, a dialogue between two lovers, probes the depths of love in the human heart.

Another crisis...another cause for thought

The Greek king of Syria ruled the

Israelites in the second century BC and tried to force them to adopt the religion and language of the Empire. During the persecutions of this period, the book of Daniel was written, a collection of six stories telling how the Israelites stood up to persecution in Babylon of old and relating four visions promising better times to come. A wise man wrote Sirach (or Ecclesiasticus), a collection of wise sayings. The great deeds of a family of warriors called the 'Maccabees' who led Jewish revolts against conquerors, were written in two books. Finally, a

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century or so BC, a Greek Jew wrote the book of Wisdom, a beautiful illumination of the meaning of life. **(The author of Wisdom likens the wisdom that comes from God to a precious woman. Refer to Chapter 7 & 8).**

Completing the story...

The New Testament is the book of the early Church. It relates the fulfilment and completion of God's promises to the Jewish people in Jesus Christ. It is the reflections of those who accepted Jesus and entered into a renewed relationship with God. Its writings come to us like love letters from the first Christians, yearning for future generations to know and share in the joy of the risen Lord as they knew him then.

Opening the 'new' books...

Some of the earliest writings available to us in the New Testament are attributed to St Paul. Paul was born a well-established Jew who originally opposed the early Christian movement but who, after a rather startling experience of conversion

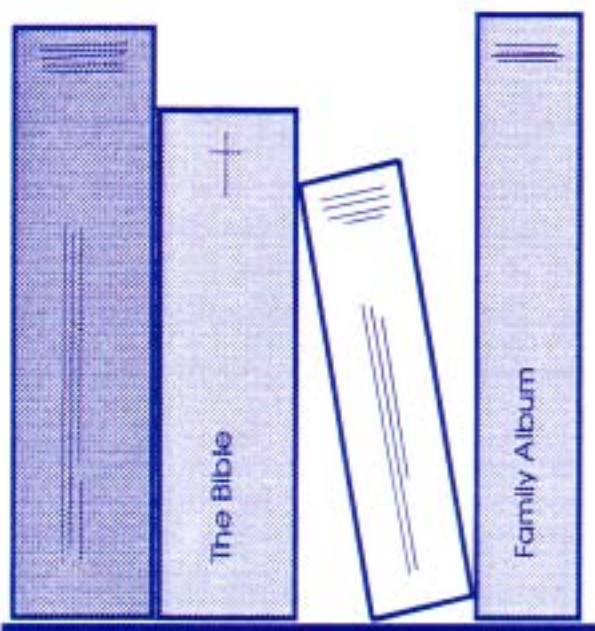
Alive then, alive now

Far from being a collection of 'dead' precepts, the bible captures the lively reflections of a people on a Spirit-led journey through life; whose convictions are capable of breathing life into our own experiences today. To say scripture is 'inspired' does not mean that it was zapped down from the heavens or that God dictated it sentence by sentence. What it does mean is that a community of people, attentive to the promptings of God's Spirit in their life events, felt moved to put into words their reflections. So, although the bible was formulated and recorded by human hands, in a more primary way it is considered to be the word and work of God.

Old but new

With each new generation, the Holy Spirit breathes a 'freshness' into God's Church which enlivens age-old truths with new insight so that they may speak to the people of their day. It is uncovering this 'freshness' of the scriptures that is the work of continued reflection and study by scholars and theologians.

Of course, being creative and open to new insights does not mean that every trendy interpretation of the scriptures is an adequate expression of its meaning. At times the Catholic Church has issued some cautions to applying either an overly 'spiritual' or an excessively 'rational' approach to the bible. Either extreme results in a distortion of the true message. As with every human endeavour, the scriptures must be subject to methods of scientific enquiry and literary critique rather than be read in a superficial or 'fundamentalist' way. On the other hand, the experience of faith from which the bible was conceived must always be taken into account.



attributed to the apostles Peter, John, James and Jude.

Paul was a tireless missionary. Neither illness, persecution, imprisonment or shipwreck could dampen his desire to spread the good news. The story of his travels and the early stages of the Church's development is captured in the book of Acts. **(Incidentally, you'll find the story of Paul's shipwreck in Chapter 27!)**

The books in the New Testament which

(which you can read about in Chapter 9 of Acts), made up for lost time by preaching the Gospel far and wide. He traveled through the Eastern provinces of the Roman Empire setting up Christian communities. When he left a community, he continued to communicate to its members through letters. In these letters he explained, encouraged and sometimes rebuked them as they strove to live as brothers and sisters in Christ. The New Testament also contains a number of shorter letters whose authorship have been

gives a fuller account of the life and teaching of Jesus are called the Gospels. There are four Gospels which, although confirming the same basic message of salvation, each tell the story with a different emphasis. Matthew's Gospel is written for a particular Jewish audience and stresses links with Old Testament figures. (Try Chapter 13 which records some of the stories Jesus used to explain God's Kingdom.) For Mark, the earliest gospel, the cross is central. (You'll find his account of the events leading up to Jesus' death in Chapter 14 & 15). Luke, a non-Jewish convert who is also the author of Acts, emphasises that Jesus came to save all people, not just the Jews. (Try reading the story of the birth of Christ in Chapter 2 of Luke's Gospel). John's Gospel differs quite markedly in style and content to the other three and stresses the divinity of Jesus. (His prologue in the opening chapter will give you a feel for his style).

The very last book in the bible is the Book of Revelation (Apocalypse). It contains the visions of a prophet named John who, in vivid symbolism, describes the triumphant Christ claiming victory over the evils of the world and leading his people to their ultimate destiny.

Your Story

Think... Talk... Pray

Does your family have a treasured photo album, or perhaps a box of writings from relatives of previous generations? What do these mean to you? What do they tell you about the things that have been precious to your family heritage?

This week, but aside ten minutes each day to read some scripture stories. Some suggested passages to start with are offered in this leaflet. As well as reading it, try 'praying it'; that is, invite God into your presence as you read, allowing the words and images to touch your mind, heart and imagination in unexpected ways.

How does your life's story relate to the story of faith told in the bible? Does your story run parallel? In the opposite direction? Are there any points of intersection?

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Jackie's Story

'When I read scripture, I find it helpful to begin by holding the bible on my lap and recalling the men and women whose lives have brought it into being. I thank God for them and ask that I, too, can experience the faith and convictions that fired their hearts. At other times, I bring to mind someone who has loved me in the present – a member of my faith family such as a relative or close friend. Habits such as these help me to experience the bible as a living, "enfleshed" expression of God's word.'