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Opening Prayer

Call to Prayer

Reading *1 Kings 19: 9 & 11-13**

. . . a great wind, but the LORD was not in the wind;
and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake;
and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire;
and after the fire, a sound of sheer silence.

Sung Response

An appropriate song: for example
Verses 1-3 of Send us your Spirit
(Dan Schutte © 1985 Dan Schutte & OCP)

Short Guided Meditation

Closing Prayer

Lord God, you have chosen to speak to us in many different ways.

Make us attentive to your Word, wherever it is to be found.

May your Holy Spirit enlighten our hearts and our minds
to the riches of Scripture.

Guide us, as we work to interpret your will for us,
so that guided by your Word,
we may walk in the way of truth
and bring others to discover it.

We ask this in the name of Christ, your Son, the eternal Word,
whom you sent to be our Light, our Way, and our Truth. Amen.

[You will find this reading in the Lectionary*
as the first reading for the 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A]

1. An Overview of the Old Testament

What we as Christians refer to as the Old Testament is also the Scriptures of the Jewish people. In the Hebrew Bible, the books are gathered into three main collections or sections;
— the ***Torah***, or the Law
— the ***Nebi'im***, or the Prophets
— and ***Ketubim***, which means "the writings".
The following overview follows the traditional Hebrew way of presenting the books that make up what we call the Old Testament.

The *Torah* ("Law") or *Pentateuch**

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy

Genesis presents events "before" history (creation, fall, tower of Babel, flood); and the Patriarchs (Abraham, Issac, Jacob, Joseph).

Exodus narrates the Israelites in Egypt; the escape from slavery around 1250 B.C., and the journey to Sinai; and the giving of the Ten Commandments at Sinai.

Leviticus contains rules of holiness, on how to be the "people of God".

Numbers presents the continuing journey from Sinai to the border of the Promised Land; and gives the conclusion to rules of holiness.

Deuteronomy provides a résumé of previous time in the desert and an account of the last 40 days before entry into the Promised Land; it ends with the death of Moses.

When did these events happen?
From around 1850 B.C. (Abraham), and the other Patriarchs,
through the escape from Egypt around 1300 B.C.,
until around 1250 B.C. (death of Moses, eve of the conquest of Canaan)

How did these books come to be written?
From oral tradition (nomadic peoples do not have books),
first transcribed into writing with settlement in Canaan around 1200 B.C.,
then constantly edited in the light of the changing experiences of the people
(for example, the tragedy of the Exile in 587 B.C.),
until final codification of the *Torah* by Ezra after the Exile around 450 B.C.

What kind of writing (literary forms) do these books use?
Narratives (so using all the variants of story-telling from myth, through saga to history); and laws.

**Pentateuch* is derived from the Greek:
penta meaning five;
and *teuchos*, which refers to the protective cover in which the scrolls of the Scriptures were kept.

In other words, it was a sort of nickname for the five scrolls (nowadays we would say five books) which make up the *Torah*.

The *Prophets*

The former Prophets

Joshua
Judges
1 & 2 Samuel
1 & 2 Kings

What events are covered by these books?

- the conquest of Canaan (modern-day Palestine) (around 1200 B.C.);
- the great transition from being a nomadic people, to a people with a land;
- how this people organized themselves, first under "judges" (about 1200-1025 B.C) and eventually under "kings" (Saul, David, Solomon: (about 1030 to 931 B.C.)
- the division into two kingdoms, Israel and Judah (931-721 B.C.)
- the end of the kingdom of Judah (721-587 B.C.)

When were these books composed?

From oral tradition beginning around 1200 B.C. (settlement in Canaan) through transcription into writing, and editing until the time of the Exile (around 550 B.C.) and even after.

What kind of writing (literary forms) do these books use?

Joshua can best be understood as a continuation of *Deuteronomy*: by the end of *Joshua* the great promise that Israel would be a numerous people, and would have possession of a promised land is complete. In the first part of the book (chapters 1-12) this is narrated by means of sagas: based on what we would call historical fact, but told to underline an essential, universal truth. Chapters 13-21 are basically lists; how the land was distributed among the tribes of Israel.

Judges retells the conquest, admitting that Israel did not win all the land, and blames this on the people's failure to be obedient to God. History, then, but narrated so as to provide lessons for morality and religious life.

1** & **2 Samuel offer some of the Bible's best story-telling; moving and profound, constructed around sagas (more interested in individuals and private life) and history (more interested in the state, public life). From both the theological message is "see God at work . . ."

1** & **2 Kings is constructed from court annals and archives, presenting the history of 400 years of monarchical rule, which ends with the destruction of both kingdoms. Into history are built prophetic narratives: the message is "observe and learn . . ."

This section entitled ***Prophets*** in the Hebrew Scriptures comprises what we nowadays would call "historical" books, as well as those we now call the "prophets."

In the Hebrew Scriptures, these six books are referred to as "the former prophets."
This is because in Old Testament theology, events are as prophetic as the uterrances and oracles (see explanation of this word on page 15) of prophets.

Within the "latter" prophets, the Hebrew Scriptures distinguish between the three great prophets, and the twelve minor prophets. This is more a reflection on the length of their respective books; each prophet is important in his own time.

The latter Prophets

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel

and the twelve Prophets

Hosea, Nahum, Joel, Habakkuk, Amos, Zephaniah, Obadiah, Haggai, Jonah, Zechariah, Micah, Malachi

What events are covered by these writings?

Individual prophets lived at specific moments, but taking an overview of prophetic writing, it runs from around 775 B.C. (the rise of the Babylonian Empire), through the Exile (587-538 B.C.), to the period of the restoration under the Persians (around 325 B.C.).

How were these books composed?

The shaping of the books we now have under the name of the prophets is largely due to the prophet's disciples, who gathered and wrote down their master's oracles and sermons. Some of this would certainly have been in the prophet's own words; other parts would be what the disciples remembered and paraphrased.

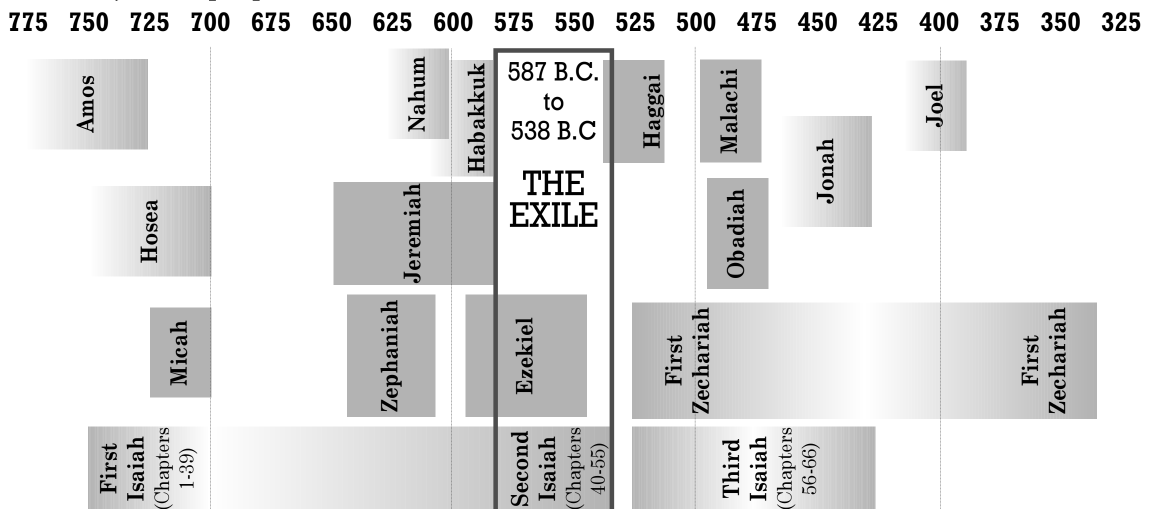
As we have them today, all the prophetic books are post-exilic. This means the final editing (adding the titles and chronological information at the beginning of the books, and organizing the ordering of the contents) took place some time after the return from Exile in 539 B.C.

The books, then, are compiled from a threefold perspective: firstly, knowing that the warnings of the prophets made before the Exile did come to pass; secondly, knowing that the people had survived the Exile; and thirdly, knowing how that changed the way in which they understood the Covenant with God and their religious practice.

In this way the message ceases to be just a warning for the people living then, and becomes a universal and timeless message to all those who consider themselves God's people. It is essentially a message of consolation that salvation can be theirs, as long as they walk in the ways of God.

This is why we usually find that the prophetic books are organized as follows;
— the warning of doom and calamity at the beginning;
— the oracle or promise of salvation at the end;
— in between, oracles against the people's enemies ("the Gentiles').

Time line for the prophets



The "Writings"

Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, 1 & 2 Chronicles

The "Writings" are primarily books of reflection or piety, in which poetry figures largely. They are mostly books of "wisdom." This a literary genre (see page 15) copied from surrounding cultures (principally Egyptian/Greek), but with the difference that for the Bible, true wisdom comes from living the covenant with God faithfully, both as an individual and as a people.

Psalms This book, often nicknamed "the prayerbook of the Old Testament," is a collection of several books of psalms or songs. These prayers sing the relationship between God and God's people. Some are songs of joy, thanksgiving, and praise; some are songs of concern and lament. There are also "royal" psalms (the king was the people's representative before God and God's envoy to the people); and psalms which are wisdom poems.

The first psalms were composed around 1000 B.C., but it is a literary genre that remained current through and well after the Exile.

Proverbs is composed of eight collections of Israel's wisdom sayings or teachings designed to help everyone—but especially the young—learn what is right, just, and honest.

The writing in this book began to take shape around 1000 B.C., but like the Psalms, it was a genre that authors continued to use. The most recent parts of the book were written around 400 B.C.

Job is a poetic narrative on the universal and perennial problem of suffering, but with a theological perspective: just how is God present in the world, and how should believers respond to that presence? By the end of the book Job is transformed from being a man walking in the light of reason to a man walking in the light of faith.

The book is attributed to Jonah, who was a prophet around 750 B.C., at the time of the fall of Nineveh, but most scholars believe it was written much later, after the Exile, around 400 B.C.

Song of Songs is a love poem attributed to Solomon (David's son) but set down in writing long after his death. At a first level it is indeed a human love-song; at a deeper level, it symbolizes the love between God and God's people.

Though ascribed to Solomon, this short book is probably a collection of poems and as presently compiled, dates to after the Exile, perhaps as late as 250 B.C.

Ruth is set to act as a bridge between the era of the Judges and the era of the Kings, by presenting the genealogy of David, who will be Israel's greatest king—a genealogy in which Ruth, a non Jew (a Moabite) is shown to be the mother of David's grandfather. The book is an invitation to go beyond an overnationalistic view, and to recognize God's concern for non-Jewish people.

Though set in the era three generations before David, this book was written after the Exile, around 400 B.C.

Lamentations confronts the problem of suffering, not to resolve it, but to let the believer express his or her sorrow in the presence of God; the prayers of a people struggling to survive in the rubble of Jerusalem.

This book was written after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C., by an eyewitness to the disaster.

Ecclesiastes is another piece of wisdom writing: full of big questions, but to which it admits not knowing the answers!

The fact that this book contains some vocabulary in Aramaic (a late form of Hebrew) shows it was written around the 3rd century B.C.

Esther is a book in which God remains in the background. It is the dramatic tale of how Esther rises to be Queen of Persia and so is able to foil a plot against the Jewish people. It can be understood as a meditation on the difference between the "what" and the "how" of God's will; what God intended was the survival of his people, but God did not dictate the means of that survival.

This book survives in two forms; one in Hebrew and one in Greek (longer by about 100 verses). Probably composed around the time of the end of the Persian Empire (late 4th century); the Greek additions may be as late as 150 B.C.

Daniel is the hero, not the author of this book, which falls into two distinct parts. Firstly, a series of folktales which portray the hero remaining faithful to God in the difficult days during the Exile (includes the famous story of Daniel being thrown to the lions, but which do not harm him). Secondly, a series of visions, often speaking of "one like the Son of Man". The overall message is a call to trust in God, even when God seems most remote.

The visions were composed during the persecution of the Jews by Antiochus IV Epiphanes of Syria in 168-164 B.C. The stories are older, but the additions in chapters 13 and 14 (which only exist in Greek) are later, just before the Christian era.

Ezra-Nehemiah was originally one single book, which deals with the restoration after the Exile. The first phase of this restoration is the rebuilding of the Temple; the second is the rebuilding of Jewish life. For both, the interest of the book is not a chronological account, but the religious dimension of this renewal, reconstituting a community living in accord with the *Torah*.

These books are the only surviving narrative accounts of the period after the Exile, and cover a period from 538 B.C. to 331 B.C. The Temple was rebuilt in 515 B.C.; Nehemiah returned from Exile to Jerusalem in 445 B.C.; Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in 339 B.C.

1** & **2 Chronicles has the ambitious aim of presenting history from Adam to Esdras. It is a theology of history, which focuses above all on an idealized moment in that history, a glimpse of the kingdom of God on earth: the time under David and Solomon. The message; when King and people are faithful to the Lord, all goes well; but when they fail to be faithful, all is misery.

The style of the Hebrew, as well as the political and religious outlook of the author make experts think this was written around 400 B.C. However, the author clearly used earlier sources in compiling this history, including some of which are now lost, some of which are found elsewhere in the Bible (*Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Joshua,* and *Ruth*, but especially *1* & *2 Samuel* and *1* & *2 Kings*).

The "deuterocanonical" books of the Old Testament*

Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Sirach (*or* Ecclesiasticus), Baruch, 1 & 2 Maccabees, *parts of* Daniel, *parts of* Esther

Tobit narrates major incidents, set around 721 B.C., from the lives of Tobit, Sarah and Tobiah, tightly interwoven for a theological purpose: God is at work in people's ordinary lives, but so as to bring God's plans to fulfillment. The book reaffirms the value of fidelity to God.
The book was written around 200 B.C.

Judith is written to show how God continues to rescue Israel, in this instance through the hand of Judith. The heroine's name means simply "Jewish woman," and she is a composite of strong women in the history of Israel (Miriam, Deborah, etc.). Written around the end of the 2nd, beginning of the 1st century B.C.

Wisdom is a book in praise of wisdom, and it is a remarkable attempt at what today we would call inculturation: how could the Jews accept the prevailing Greek culture and civilization without betraying the traditions of their ancestors? The result is that the ideas, language and literary style of Greek culture is borrowed, but all to demonstrate the excellence ("wisdom") of the Jewish faith.
Written in Greek sometime during the 1st century B.C.

Sirach is a collection of proverbs or wisdom sayings, most probably designed to combat the fall off in religious observance among Jews as they were attracted to the Greek culture. Real wisdom, for Sirach, is found in the traditions of Israel, and not in the pagan philosophies of the day.
The author probably lived before the Maccabean revolt (see below), and his grandson (who translated the book) lived after the revolt.

Baruch like *Tobit* and *Wisdom*, is written for people who are away from the 'Promised Land," and deals with the theme of exile and separation. Because of the dangers of living in a pagan land, there is a strong emphasis on monotheism, but the predominant theme of the book is hope. Hope because of an "eternal" covenant; salvation which comes from an "eternal" God; promises of "eternal" happiness.
The book is attributed to Baruch, (who wrote down and preserved the teaching of Jeremiah), but this is an honorary attribution.The writing is contemporary with Sirach, so written sometime after 190 B.C.

1 & 2 Maccabees recounts the adventures of three brothers (Judas, Jonathan and Simon) and the resistance movement they lead. They succeed in reclaiming the Temple (still celebrated by the feast of Hanukkah), but two brothers are killed. Simon brought the revolt to a succesful conclusion in 168 B.C. The book offers a new attitude to life and death, and to the relationship between the living and the dead.
Written around 100 B.C. in Hebrew. However, the Hebrew is lost, so what we have is a Greek translation (but full of Jewish idioms).

*See the explanation of "deuterocanonical" on the facing page.

"Deuterocanonical"

In Christian Bibles, the Old Testament includes several books, and parts of books, which are not found in the Hebrew Scriptures. Some Christian churches refer to these as "apocryphal" books, and some do not consider them part of the Bible. The Catholic Church calls them "**deutero-canonical**," but counts them as part of the Bible.

How did this happen?

With the rise of Alexander the Great and his conquest of the world, the dominant culture became Greek. Sometime between 300 and 250 B.C. the Old Testament was translated into Greek. This translation is known as the **Septuagint**. Various books, written after this (in Greek) were added, so that the Greek version of the Old Testament used by the Christians of the early Church contained 46 books.

When Judaism fixed the canon (see next section) of its Scriptures at the end of the 1st century A.D., they decided to include only the 39 books that had been written in Hebrew, and excluded what had been written in Greek.

At the time of the Reformation, Protestants decided to adopt this shorter Hebrew canon, because they considered it more authentic

The "canon"

The word "canon" in English is directly derived from the Greek word *kanon*, which in turn can be traced back through Babylonian (*qanu*, "reed") to Sumerian. The word came to mean a measuring rod, and thereafter as a metaphor for a fixed standard. This is the word that is used to refer to the definitive and fixed list of books considered as sacred Scripture (both the books of the Old Testament and of the New Testament).

In the Catholic Canon, there are 46 books in the Old Testament and 27 books in the New Testament.

Some of these are referred to as **proto-canonical**: (literally, "first canonical" because they were the first to be part of the Canon. Others, are called **deuterocanonical** (literally "second canonical") because they were admitted to the Canon later, recognized by the Church after a certain hesitancy in the patristic period. However, they were read and quoted from the early days of Christianity.

2. An Overview of the New Testament

The contrasts between the Old and the New Testament can be quite striking;
— the Old Testament is far longer, with about three times as many books;
— the Old Testament covers events from about 1850 B.C. (Abraham) to about 50 B.C., a span of nearly 2,000 years, whereas the New Testament covers only approximately 100 years.

Yet we believe that, in essence, they offer us exactly the same thing; the revelation that God loves us, has loved us since the beginning, and calls us to unending happiness in that love.

The fact that those who compiled the New Testament chose to give it that title shows they realized that there is an essential continuity between these two great phases of revelation. It was only because they chose to call it the New Testament that the nickname of "Old Testament' was applied to the Hebrew Scriptures. An unfortunate title, if for you "old" means outdated, past, from long ago and to be forgotten! It might have been better to call it the "First Testament."

That, certainly, is how the Church encourages us to understand it: "The Old Testament is an indispensable part of Sacred Scripture" because "its books are divinely inspired" and so they "retain a permanent value" [see the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 121].

In the early days of the Church (A.D. 144), Marcion was expelled from the Church for teaching that the Old Testament should be rejected because the New Testament rendered it void.

For the Church, the 'Old Testament' is the acccount of God making covenant with his people, a covenant that God did not revoke but fulfilled.

The New Testament is the account of that fulfillment. Christ says: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17). On the night before he died, Jesus took the passover cup which celebrated the saving covenant between God and his people, and pronounced that it had become "the cup of the new covenant . . ." (cf. Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20)

In summary: "The unity of the two Testaments proceeds from the unity of God's plan and his Revelation. The Old Testament prepares for the New and the New Testament fulfils the Old; the two shed light on each other; both are true Word of God." [*Catechism*, 140]

The New Testament contains:

- the four *Gospels* (see page 11)
- the *Acts of the Apostles* (see page 12)
- a collection of *Letters* (see page 12)
- the *Book of Revelation* also known as the *Apocalypse* (see page 12)

The Gospels

There are four Gospels in the New Testament. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke are known as the "synoptic Gospels," because there are so many parallels between them. "Synoptic" means "sharing the same vision."

John's Gospel, later than the other three, is far more symbolic and theological in content and style.

	When & Where	For Whom	Image of Jesus	Purpose	Comments
MARK	After Peter's martyrdom in AD 65: perhaps as early as AD 65 and before AD 70 (the destruction of the Temple). Rome	Converts to Christianity in Rome: principally Gentiles, but also from Judaism. Community experiencing persecution, feeling threatened.	Jesus as fulfillment of "Suffering Servant" (cf. *Isaiah*) and "Son of Man" (cf. *Daniel*) prophecies.	To encourage the community to believe in the power of Jesus to rescue them from sickness, evil, and death. Reminder that new life of faith is not easy; call to follow Jesus by serving others and being ready to suffer.	Shortest Gospel (661 verses). Expected imminent "Second Coming" of Christ. Very "dramatic." **"Christ in action"**
MATTHEW	AD 70s—AD 80s (perhaps in part before the destruction of the Temple). Antioch (modern-day Turkey)	Converts to Christianity from Judaism in Palestine.	Jesus as fulfilling the "Messiah" prophecies, and so as the new Moses, and/or as the new David.	To show Jewish converts (referring to the Scriptures and traditions they already knew well) that Jesus' mission was the fulfillment of the *Torah* (the Law and the Covenant).	Structured around five sermons, as the five "books" of the new *Torah*. Key themes: Church as new Israel, new kingdom. The expression "kingdom of God" occurs 52 times. **"Teaching Christ"**
LUKE	AD 70s—AD 80s (after the destruction of the Temple). Achaea (Greece)	Gentile converts to Christianity, of Greek culture.	Jesus as the new Adam, Savior of humanity, the center of history.	To announce two key ideas: that God's love is for everyone; that Jesus came to be the Savior of all people. Hence concern for all classes of society (poor, women, outcasts, criminals).	Structured as journey to Jerusalem. First of a two-volume work (vol. two is the *Acts of the Apostles*). Gospel of joy, pardon, prayer, and the Holy Spirit. **"Gentle Christ"**
JOHN	About AD 90-100 Ephesus (modern-day Turkey)	Gentile converts to Christianity, of Greek culture.	Jesus as the *Logos*, the "Word made flesh," the Son of God.	To show Jesus' relationship with the Father: Jesus as Son of God, divine and human nature in one person, the pre-existent Word of God. Offers seven "signs" which show to the eyes of faith Jesus' true nature as Son of God.	Belief in Jesus as the gateway to eternal life; saving encounter with Jesus in/through the sacraments, (Baptism and Eucharist). Most "theological" of the gospels. **"Cosmic Christ"**

Acts of the Apostles

The ***Acts of the Apostles*** was written by Luke as the sequel to his Gospel. It begins with the Ascension and Pentecost, and recounts the life of the early Church up to the time of the death of Peter (A.D. 65) and of Paul (A.D. 67).

Letters or Epistles

Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians,
1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon,
Hebrews,
James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2 & 3 John, Jude

The first fourteen in the above list of letters were traditionally attributed to Paul. The ***Letter to the Hebrews*** itself does not claim to be by Paul (which is why when it was included in the biblical Canon it was put after the other letters). Although the other thirteen do claim to be by Paul, most scholars believe that some (for example, ***Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy***) are the work of Paul's disciples.

Four letters (***Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians***, and ***Philemon***) are known as the "Captivity Epistles," for the obvious reason that the author says he is in prison.

Three (***1*** & ***2 Timothy, Titus***) are known as "Pastoral Epistles" because they are addressed to individuals rather than to a community, and offer pastoral advice to either Timothy or Titus on caring for the community.

The other seven letters (***James, Jude, 1*** & ***2 Peter, 1, 2*** & ***3 John***) are known as the "Catholic Epistles," because (unlike the Letters of Paul) they were not addressed to a particular person or church. They are universal, addressed in a general way to everyone, which is what "catholic" means literally.

(* In fact, the *Second* and *Third Letter of John* are addressed to particular persons, but they are grouped with the *First Letter of John*.)

When were these letters written?

The oldest letters in the New Testament date from around A.D. 52 (*1* & *2 Thessalonians*). Most of Paul's letters were written between A.D. 57-58, and some between A.D. 61-63 when he was under military guard.

The rest of the letters were written in the late 60s, 70-80s, with the exception of *1 John*, which was written some time around A.D. 100 (*2* & *3 John* may be from the same time, or may be earlier).

Revelation (*or* Apocalypse)

Revelation is a classic example of apocalyptic writing (see page 16). Written during a time of persecution, it invites the faithful to a vision of the end of time, designed to reassure the faithful and encourage the wavering. It was written around A.D. 95.

3. Telling Our Family Stories

Share the *what* of a story

Turn to your small group and share a story about how your family came to be who or where you are as a family.

Some examples could be:

— how someone came from another country

— how a couple met

— a defining moment or event for your family

Share the *how* of a story

After everyone has shared, use some of the following questions to help further discussion which should move from being about the content of the stories, to exploring the way in which the stories are told (not so much the "what" as the "how"):

- What struck you most in telling your story?
- What struck you in listening to other people's stories?
- Are there common elements to your stories?
- Are your family stories told word for word? Which parts are and which parts are not? Why?
- If you were writing your story down, what would you include?
  What would you no longer include?
  Is there anything you feel you need to add?
  What emphasis would you give?
  Why?
- If someone else in your family were to edit your story, what would be changed?
  What emphasis would she/he give?
  Why?
- Would you tell the story in exactly the same way if you were telling it to someone outside your family?
- Even within your family, would you talk about your family stories in the same way with your nieces and nephews as you do with your grandparents?
- Are there aspects of your family story that it is easier to talk about with your grandparents than with your parents?
- Are there aspects of your family story that it is easier for your grandparents to share with you, more than they were able to share it with your parents?
- Looking at your extended family, is there a difference in the way your father's side of the family deals with their family story, and the way your mother's side of the family deals with theirs? What does the way you tell your story owe to each of these?
- How does your family deal with any "skeletons in the closet"? Are there some things that your family passes over in silence? If so, why? If not, how do you deal with them?
- Are there any customs which are preserved in your family that come from another culture? Expressions you use that might come from another language?

4. Literary Forms Used in the Bible

Literary Forms are quite simply stylized ways of writing that are used in literature. Put more colloquially, they are strategies authors use to get across their message, or to help their story along. Literary forms belong to all literature, and while some cultures, eras, and languages seem to have a preference for certain forms over others, literary forms are a universal feature of all literature, anywhere, anytime.

In any book you will find a range of literary forms. This is all the more true of the Bible, because it is not really a book, but a library of books. Our word *bible* in English comes from the Greek, where the word was *biblia*, in the plural, meaning "books" and not just "book."

So in as much as the Bible is a collection of pieces of literature, it is no surprise to find that it is full of literary forms. And since the composition of the Bible spans many centuries, and its texts took shape in different lands, it is no surprise either to discover a very diverse array of literary forms in Biblical writing. Some of these are familiar to our time and culture, others are less so.

In their writing, the biblical authors adopted a particular literary form, which they chose to help convey a message. We, as readers in the 21st century, need to make the effort to get on their wavelength, to identify and appreciate this "packaging," so as better to hear the message it is designed to carry.

Here are the major literary forms that we encounter in reading the Bible.

Myth

A myth is first and foremost a story, but one designed to portray an underlying spiritual truth or basic conviction of a culture, and the reader is expected to see through the details of the narrative to what we would now call the philosophical, psychological or theological truth.

Myths are particularly concerned with explaining our origins. In non-biblical myths the narrative support is often about divinities or superhuman beings; in biblical myths, this becomes the struggle between good and evil.

Examples of biblical myths: the account of creation in *Genesis* 2, of the fall in *Genesis* 3, and the story of Cain and Abel in *Genesis* 4.

Saga

A saga is an account in popular style, narrating either pre-history or the early history of a people, especially by recounting heroic tales about the ancestors or founders of a particular people, tribe or nation. Many of the stories in the early chapters of Genesis are sagas: for example, the stories of Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac (Genesis 12-26); Jacob (*Genesis* 27-36); and Joseph (*Genesis* 37-50)

Legend

A legend is much like myth in pointing to truths considered essential or fundamental by the culture, but told through the stories of figures and events in historical time. Legendary figures in the Bible include Moses, Solomon, David, Samson, etc.

Allegory

An allegory is an extended metaphor or comparison, where persons or objects stand for abstract ideas, moral qualities or spiritual realities. An example of a simple allegory about Jerusalem can be found in *Ezekiel* 16:1-63. One way to understand the *Song of Songs* is an extended allegory of God's love for his people.

Historical Writings

Our contemporary view of "history" is as an objective social science. This is, in fact, a relatively recent perspective. Our word for "history" is derived from exactly the same word that gave us "story."

In biblical terms, we speak of writings being "historical" when they concern historical events and persons, ones that really took place (in contrast to events portrayed in myths, legends and sagas).

However, remember that all "history" is told from a perspective: history that occurs in the Bible is no exception, not least because it has always at least a "theological" perspective. For the Bible, the purpose of "history" is to explain *why* something happened, or to draw a lesson from it, rather than recording accurate details of *what* happened.

Prophetic Texts

In everyday language, prophecy has come to mean "foretelling the future." This is not an essential part of the biblical meaning of prophecy, which means rather a message from God, entrusted to a prophet (literally "a spokes-person") to be passed on to others. These messages, which are called "oracles," vary in both style and content. Sometimes they are messages of consolation in the face of some great calamity; other times, they are warnings, or even condemnations. What they have in common is inviting the people to read the signs of the times, and above all to take from them a lesson for living. Oracles are usually in poetic form.

Wisdom Literature

The underlying style in wisdom writings is that of a teacher handing on learning to a pupil, or parents to their children. The "learning" is usually based on observations about human nature, or the moral consequences of human behaviors.

The Wisdom Literature in the bible is found in the books of *Proverbs*, *Ecclesiastes*, *Wisdom*, *Sirach* as well as some of the *Psalms* and parts of the book of *Job*. (See pages 6-7 and 8 for more details about these books of the Bible and how they use the wisdom genre.)

Gospels

The word "gospel" comes from Middle English *godspel* (*god*: good and *spel*: news), which makes it a direct equivalent of the Greek *eu* and *aggelion*, which gave the intermediate Latin *evangelium*.

Although this could be applicable to any announcement of "good news" of some important event (such as a birth or a victory), the term has come to stand for a single narrative which connects certain stories from the life of Jesus, a collection of his sayings and teachings, and above all, accounts of Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection. The narrative structuring is not strictly historical or chronological, but theological.

The term is limited almost entirely to the four canonical gospels that appear in the New Testament, and which are attributed to *Matthew*, *Mark, Luke*, and *John*.

Most scholars agree that while the gospel as a literary genre may seem to have similarities with other forms (such as biography), the gospels are a unique form of literature. They are a subtle combination of biographical stories with the preaching tradition of the early Church. This combination allowed this unique literary genre to develop. Then, as the nature of the Church changed, so too did the scope or the need for more "gospels."

Parables

Parables are stories drawn from everyday experience, told to illustrate moral or ethical points.

The problem is that what may have counted as an "everyday" experience for the author and his original listeners or readers no longer corresponds to our experience today.

Revelation/Apocalyptic Literature

Apocalypse and *Revelation* mean exactly the same thing; the first is derived directly from Greek, the second from Latin. Apocalyptic literature contains mysterious revelations, usually hidden in very symbolic language and which require interpretation through an angel. This writing deals with the eventual victory of God over all other earthly powers in the "end times," not as a prediction of future events, but rather, as a highly symbolic way of interpreting the present.

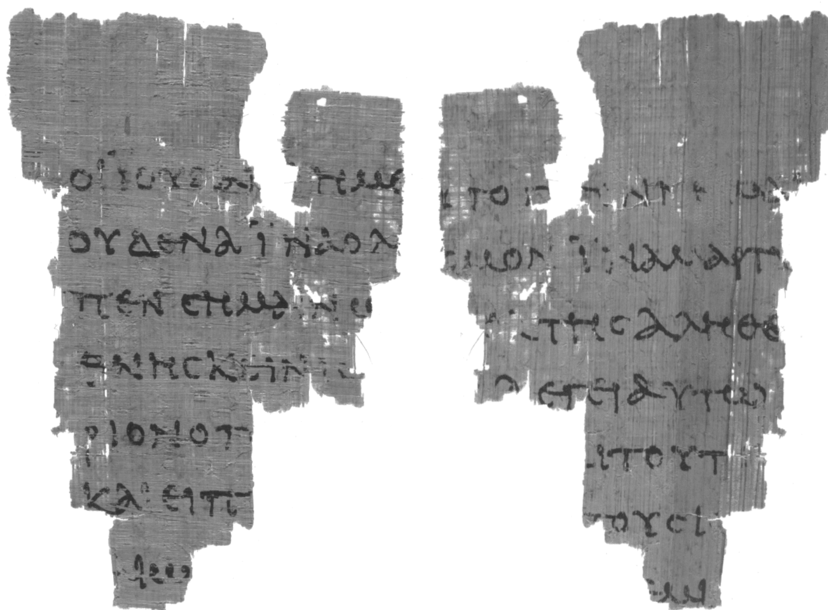
Examples of apocalytpic writing in the Bible: chapters 7-12 of *Daniel* in the Old Testament; and *Revelation* in the New Testament.

Letters or Epistles

In the New Testament there are 21 documents that take the form of Letters or Epistles. Most of these are actual letters, but some are treatises presented as if they are letters.

The standard structure of the letter in the New Testament is:

— a greeting, mentioning sender/s and recipients;
— a prayer, usually of thanksgiving;
— the main body is an exposition of Christian teaching (usually provoked by particular circumstances) and conclusions about ethical behavior;
— sometimes the letter will include practical details (the author's travel plans, for example);
— concluding advice and farewell.



The oldest extant fragment of the New Testament is this scrap of papyrus from John's Gospel.

The front side has part of verses 31-33 from John 18; and the reverse side has part of verses 37-38. It dates from the first half of the second century. It is in the John Rylands Library, University of Manchester, England.

5. Letting Scripture Speak

Introduction

What you are about to do, people have done for centuries and even millenia before you. You are the most recent in the long chain of people throughout history who have taken the time to open their eyes and ears to the voice of God speaking through human history.

Scripture is nothing less, nothing more, than the record of moments in our shared past when people realized that through an experience, God was talking to them. What Scripture enshrines as best it can in mere words is that experience, so that it may serve future generations.

If those words are to serve as the means of dialogue between you and God, two things need to happen:

— you need to give yourself a chance to hear what the text has to say;

— you need to give the text the chance to say what it wants to say.

Give yourself a chance . . .

Find a quiet space, away from your roommates.

Take a few moments in silence, recognizing the presence of God who has accompanied you throughout the day, and is within you at this moment. Think about what is going on in your life.

Scripture is a vast collection of stories of how God has worked in people's lives throughout time. Yet God is continuing to work! Taking the time to become aware of our experiences allows us to recognize God there.

Once you are ready, you might pick up a text from Scripture, and begin to read it. In reading a text, you automatically make sense of it. Ultimately, what you want from the text is to know what is it saying to me, here and now, today, about my life, about me . . .

This is a natural and very good instinct. In fact, it is where we want to be at the end of reading a text. But this instinct carries with it a subtle danger: how can I be sure that the message that I taking from the text is the one that it is intended to carry? Am I imposing "my" meaning on the text?

Give the text a chance

If we stay at the level of reading, we are in danger reducing the potential dialogue with the text to a monologue: it can become what I want to see there.

We need to acknowledge that there is a distance between us and any text, and that we need to make our way towards the text, and not just drag the text towards ourselves!

We need to get beyond merely reading, and be willing to study the text. "Study" here is nothing to do with learning stuff so as to get a good mark in an exam. Just as you work at a relationship if you want it to deepen and flourish, so too if you want to deepen your relationship with God, you need to be prepared to "work" at Scripture texts.

Believe it or not, it means doing things that you already do instinctively in ordinary conversation. You already apply what you know about a person to interpreting what they say. Imagine an elderly spinster aunt, who comes into your room while your music center is blasting out whatever happens to be the latest music. You are not at all surprised to hear her say "You young people today don't know what real music is!" Do you take this as a personal attack, and get all huffy, or launch into a virulent defense of your taste in music? No! You say to yourself something like "Here she goes again . . ." In other words, how you hear, receive and interpret the message is colored by what you know about her. You have done this thanks to an analysis of something which is external to the text, in this case by using knowledge about the author of the text.

At other times, you instinctively make sense of a text thanks to internal analysis. You come across a long sentence in this book: by the time you get to the end, you have forgotten a bit of what was at the beginning, so you go back and reread. You discover a word for the first time: you might look it up in the dictionary; you might ask others if they know what it means; you might simply read and reread the paragraph, to see if you can get the meaning of the word from the context.

Giving a text a chance means developing these instincts for analysis, searching inside and outside the text for clues as how best to interpret it.

What am I reading?

When you are reading contemporary books, you automatically make adjustments for the kind of material you are reading. Instinctively, you would not approach a *Harry Potter* novel in the same way as you do your history textbook.

Nor would you confuse a love poem where someone sings of a "broken heart" with a medical text explaining why and how heart transplants are carried out.

The Bible is a library of books, written at different times, in different circumstances and different styles. You need to cultivate the same natural instincts you use to place and interpret modern day texts, and apply them just as easily to the biblical texts.

At first you will need to depend on hints and explanations that "experts" offer—but you will be surprised how quickly you begin to get a good enough feel for how the Bible was put together, and within that, what kind of text you happen to be reading and reflecting on.

Most good editions of the Bible (the main ones are presented on pages 25-26) offer an introduction to the biblical books or section of books, and will offer clues to what kind of literature you are reading.

Read it!

Read the Scripture passage s l o w l y.

This may sound like really obvious advice, but we are in a "skim for pertinent information" mode for so much of our lives that we sometimes unthinkingly apply this to Scripture as well.

This is especially true if we have heard the story before (or have heard stories about it). We may simply presume we already know what it says. Here is a little example: you know the magnificent parable, told in Luke's Gospel about the son who asks for all his money, then leaves home . . . ? How many of you were ready to answer, "Oh, yes, the parable of the prodigal son." If you take the time to read what Luke actually wrote, you will discover it is a parable about a father and two sons—the prodigal son is only half of the story.

So take the time to read the passage:

- What stays with you?
- What strikes you?

Look at where this passage occurs within Scripture:

- Is it from the Old or the New Testament?
- From which book and what kind of book?
- And within the particular book from which it is taken—what comes before and after it?

Be prepared to note down what strikes you.

The questions to ask

A quote out of context can ruin someone's reputation. It can be made to mean the opposite of what the original says. The same thing happens with Scripture. Knowing the genre of the story can help us, but it is also helpful to know something about the culture and circumstances of those in biblical times.

This means looking for the answer to questions which can be simply expressed as:

- What seems to make sense, and what does not make sense?
- What customs or other cultural references mentioned in the text do I need to know about if I am to understand this passage?

The acronym **AACH**! can also be helpful with this:

Author—Who is the author?

Audience—Who is the audience?

Context—What is the context?

Historical situation—What is the historical situation?

Alternatively, you ask as many of the **W** questions as are appropriate:

Who? **W**hat? **W**hen? **W**here? **W**hy? Ho**W**?

Who means clarifying both who is the author, and who this story is destined for.

When working with ancient texts, you need to know that their idea of "authorship" does not correspond exactly to our modern idea. For example, the books of the prophets were compiled from what the prophet's disciples noted and/or remembered of what the prophet said. In the book of Isaiah, this extends to the disciples continuing to write long after his death, reshaping Isaiah's legacy of messages to the changing circumstances of the people.

You may need to distinguish several levels when it comes to identifying to whom the text is directed. For example, a parable uttered by Jesus was meant first and foremost for those who were gathered around listening to him. But the fact that a parable appears in a Gospel (written one or two generations later) means that the author of that Gospel knew it was something that was relevant to the pastoral circumstances of the community for whom he was writing. A warning which Jesus launched about the arrogance or self-righteousness of some of the Pharisees is not simply against a particular Pharisee that he happened to encounter in his life; when it is in the Gospel it becomes a warning to the early Christian community not to be smug and complacent, not to be pharisee-like themselves. (A third level is how this Gospel speaks to you today . . . but part of being sure about that is to make certain you already appreciate the first two levels.)

A good teacher and/or author tailors the message he or she wants to deliver to the audience for whom the message is intended: the kind of language (simple or complex), the kind of examples (relevant to their life style and circumstances), and above all in the Bible, the kind of religious references (depending on whether the message is for Jewish or non-Jewish listeners). Be sensitive to all these, and you will find yourself getting closer to the author.

What means identifying the nature of the text, which is usually closely tied to the **when**, the **where**, and the **why**. This means exploring the historical context. It means researching any unusual cultural customs and references to which it alludes.

The **where** and the **when** means using whatever historical and archeological information is available to complete your picture of the circumstances (time and space) under which the text was writtem. Imagine you're in Europe: the kind of message you send back to your family and friends will be very different if you are writing from some foreign jail, than if you are saying how much you are enjoying your holiday! An extreme example? Not for the Bible, where the disaster of the Exile so profoundly marked the experience of the Jewish people that texts written after are completely different in how they see the relationship with God and their religion from those written before.

How means highlighting any special styles of expression and working to understand them. This covers everything from the literary genres or forms to the style of language used, down to verifying the meaning of the word the author chose.

Resources for answers

Where can you find the answers to these kinds of questions ?

Firstly, if you have a good edition of the Bible, the notes and introductions will help you. The principal Bible editions in English are presented on pages 25-26. In terms of the notes and introductions they offer, the best editions of the Bible for students are:

the *Catholic Study Bible*,which is the *New American Bible* with a comprehensive reading guide (see page 25 for a fuller description)

the the full edition of the *New Jerusalem Bible* (see page 25 for a fuller description)

Thereafter, you may wish to consult biblical commentaries or dictionaries. Here are four:

The *Collegeville Bible Commentary* (published by Liturgical Press) is designed to be comprehensive yet concise. It aims to offer "the latest in biblical scholarship—literary, historical, and theological—without the complex theories and debates." It follows the New American Bible (NAB) translation.

The New Jerome Biblical Commentary (published by PrenticeHall) which decribes itself as "a compact commentary on the whole Bible written by Roman Catholic scholars according to the principles of modern biblical criticism." It is a 1500-page mini-encyclopedia on the Bible, extremely insightful, but very definitely "for an audience of educated readers who wish to study the Scriptures."

Another resource, scholarly but clearly written and accessible is John L McKenzie's *Dictionary of the Bible* (published by the Bruce Publishing Company).

William Barclay's Commentaries are classics for students of the Bible. He had in-depth background on the culture at the time the NT books were written, acquired over years of meticulous research, that means he can offer shortcuts to insights normally unattainable by merely reading the Scriptures. Above all, he had an ability to express this in very accessible language. Not all of Barclay's personal religious beliefs were entirely orthodox; in other words, be careful not to let him tell you how to interpret Scripture. But do let him help you get close to the force, meaning and poetry of the original. All 17 volumes on the entire New Testament are available on CDROM.

Here are websites which are useful either because they offer the Bible online in various translations, and even in the original Hebrew and Greek, or because they offer background reading and commentary:

- for online versions of the Bible

  www.biblegateway.com/versions/

- for biblical commentaries, biblical dictionaries, reflections on the readings

  www.catholic-resources.org

  www.liturgy.slu.edu

  www.crosswalk.com (click on the *Bible Study tools* button/menu)

Recognizing Scripture as A Story

We all know that God is beyond anything we can imagine. So, throughout time, people have told stories about the way that God has worked in their lives. The Bible is a collection of such stories, yet, the same rules apply to these stories as to other stories in our lives. We have to have a grasp on the characters, the ironies, the moral, the symbolism, to truly understand the story. We also have to look at the authors of the different works. Authors usually have a plan when they set out to write, and while receiving information from certain sources, edit, collect and arrange the material according to their own aim or style. It is important to keep this in mind as we read a passage.

Applying this to your passage—

- What story is being told in this passage?
- By whom is it being told?
- Is it told in any other place in the bible?
- What are the differences and similarities when compared to other biblical versions of the same story?
- Is there a moral or point to the story? What is it? How do I feel when I hear it?

Thank you, experts!

For all of the analysis and study suggested above, you are not alone! Scholars have dedicated great time and effort to researching the kind of information we need, and this is available in the various books to which we have made reference. In summary, this scholarship can help us in three main areas:

— making the connection between the passage or text and historical events we know about from other sources

— offering explanations of any customs and references which are unusual to us

— helping identify special styles of expression and providing explanations of what these mean.

The most important part of the exercise, however, is only about to begin, which is: what are you going to make of all of this? The scholars and theologians can offer their opinion, but they cannot answer "your" question, which is, "what is the message, here and now, today, for me? What is this text calling me to do, in my own life?"

With some texts, you may find the answers come easily. At other times,there may be more ambiguity in discerning the message. For example, what does it mean to truly "turn the other cheek?"

Let the information that you have digested and your own thoughts dialogue for a while.

- Are your own opinions confirmed by anything you read?
- Do you have an opinion that you do not see expressed anywhere else?

Above all, be attentive to the questions that this scripture raises, and the lessons that it has to teach, especially in regards to dilemmas and situations that we all face.

Applying this to your passage—

- What questions does this passage raise?
- What thoughts or feelings arise as I read this passage?
- How do the opinions I have read correspond with what I feel?
- What does it have to say about situations in my own life?

Bringing it Back

Let the Scripture, the background, your thoughts, and the other opinions come to a point of synthesis, or a point of coexistence (if no synthesis can be found). Where is this passage calling me? Be aware that the same passage may speak quite differently to you and to your life tomorrow, next week, or next year. Reading and reflecting on Scripture is a dynamic experience.

Applying this to your passage:

- Where is this passage calling me?
- What new understandings come from my study of this passage?
- What do I appreciate in a new way, thanks to this passage and working to understand it?
- What practical consequences for my life style, and for my religious life do I hear this passage calling me to make?
- To what actions am I going to commit myself?

A Worked Out Example

The next three pages offer a sample exercise of:

1 taking a passage;

2 working to observe what and how the author wrote it, and probing the why;

3 most importantly, in the light of all this, expressing what the text says to me, here and now, and for my life.

What am I reading?
Glean what information you can from the reference.

This passage is:
from the New Testament;
from the Gospels;
from the synoptic Gospels;
from the Gospel of Luke;
from the beginning of Luke's Gospel

The main literary genre, then is "Gospel," and within that, it is an "infancy narrative."

Since it is from Luke, we should expect a presentation for non-Jewish readers, and which is likely to make use of standard features of Greek culture with which they would be familiar.

Greek literature had a literary form of presenting the childhood of the hero of the story in a way that foreshadows what the child will later become and achieve in adulthood.

One way to understand the infancy narratives in Luke is as using this literary form. This should make us alert for possible hints in this passage to later key moments in Jesus' life.

Luke is writing for cultured and educated people, living within the Roman Empire. They all knew the significance of ***Augustus****. They would know that when Augustus was born, his father sent out a message announcing "the* ***good news****" that the "son of the Most High" had been born. As he matured, Augustus was celebrated as "the savior of the world" and "the beginning of* ***the good news for the world****."*

*Luke is able to build on this, and by making explicit reference to Augustus he is emphasizing that the real "****good news****" is about the birth of Jesus, a name that means "****savior****."*

Although the original people for whom Luke's Gospel was written were not Jewish, they would certainly have been educated enough to understand the reference to ***David****, Israel's legendary king, and probably knew how he was out looking after* ***sheep*** *when they came to find and anoint him (make him a "****messiah****"). As they heard Luke's narration of Jesus' birth, they could not fail to mistake the reference to* ***shepherds****, and to* ***Bethlehem*** *as the "****city of David****."*

Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from **Emperor Augustus** that **all the world** should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to **the city of David called Bethlehem**, because **he was descended from the house and family of David**. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them **in the inn**.

In that region there were **shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by** night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you

good news of great joy **for all the people**: to you is born this day **in the city of David** a **Savior**, who is **the Messiah**, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the
highest heaven,
and on earth peace among
those whom he favors!"

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

*The word that Luke uses for '**inn**' comes up twice in his Gospel; once here, and then later in Luke 22:11, for the place where the last supper is held. The usual translation for the second use is "guest room" or simply "room"; the usual translation here in the story of Jesus' birth is "inn."*

*The Greek word that Luke uses (*kataluma*) is derived from what in English would be "journey break"; in other words, a place where you would stay in mid-journey. In both the instance of the census in this infancy passage and of being in Jerusalem for Passover, people would stay with relatives wherever possible. The traditional house often had rooms for people on a second floor, above more simple quarters on ground level which would be for animals. This is why when speaking of the Last Supper, we often say it took place in "the upper room" (See Luke 22:12).*

Here, for Mary and Joseph as they await their baby's birth, it could mean there was no space in the upper room, so they had to use the lower space normally reserved for the animals.

Did the census to which Luke refers take place, historically? It is not certain.

So what might Luke be inviting his readers to hear? The important part is that the census is " ***of the whole world****": Luke is inviting us to understand the universal significance of Jesus' birth; a* ***Messiah****, not just for the Jewish people, a* ***Savior*** *not just for the Roman Empire, but* ***for all the people.***

Another way to get to grips with this text would be to compare how Luke presents the birth of Jesus with the way it is presented in Matthew's Gospel.

Because Matthew is writing for people who are converts to Christianity from Judaism, he can be more explicit about the references to Jesus as the Messiah, fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies.

For example, his Gospel opens with a developed genealogy of Jesus, beginning with Abraham but above all, structured around Abraham.

Or again, in explicitly applying to Jesus the prophecy from Isaiah that "the virgin shall be with child and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel" (Matthew 1:23; cf. Isaiah 7:14).

The previous two pages represent an attempt to open our ears and eyes to the literary devices that Luke used, so that the message he wanted would resonate for his listeners or readers. However fascinating, this is only a step in our process. Having given Luke the chance to speak clearly, we can then say:

— "So what does this mean for me today?"

— "What questions and thoughts are prompted by this close listening to Luke?"

You will probably find that your response comes most readily in the form of a question. There is a healthy humility in that: can we ever be certain that we are interpreting exactly what the author meant? So responding with a question is an honest way of acknowledging the distance between ourselves and the text. But as you become more familiar with Scripture texts, hopefully you will reach the stage of saying things like, "Surely what Luke is trying to say here is . . .".

At this point, you are meant to give your personal response—which obviously we cannot print here! But here are some sample responses, from the team that scripted this book.

- Our exploration of the text revealed Luke's emphasis on "all the world," that Jesus is "for all people."
  - — Is this the way I understand and live my faith? What is my attitude toward those who are not Christians, especially those who are on campus with me?
  - — The shepherds do not keep the "good news" to themselves but share it: the Gospel says "all who heard what they had to say were amazed by it." Do I consider it part of my faith to "amaze" others with the "good news"?
  - — And those of us who are Christians, but not necessarily Catholics, do we ever get together to celebrate or to faith share on what we have in common? That is how this Gospel passage ends, with "praising and glorifying God."
- Luke begins by referring to the Emperor and his census.
  - — Are there ways in which we have modeled our Church life on "the Empire" and bureaucracy instead of the gospel ("good news")? Are there any ways in which we let the institution get in the way? If so, what can we do to adjust or correct that?
  - — Through his census, the Emperor says "Count everybody!"
    God, through the birth of Christ, is saying
    "Everybody counts!"
    Isn't this exactly how Luke's Gospel will unfold, showing Jesus' concern for everyone, especially the traditional outcasts?
- Our exploration of the text uncovered that Luke uses the same word here ("no room at *the inn*" as he will use later for the room where the Last Supper is held.
  - — Is Luke inviting us to see that Bethlehem is only a stop on the way to Jerusalem?
  - — To see that God gives Jesus to the world in this Gospel, but a giving truly fulfilled when Jesus gives himself "body and blood" and "for all" at the Last Supper?
  - — And perhaps there is "no room" at this point, because it is too soon, because Luke wants us to be focused on the purpose of Jesus coming into the world: *why* Jesus came, not so much *how* he came?

Add your own observations, thoughts, or questions:

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6. The Bible in English

NAB
New American Bible

This translation is the fruit of a collaborative effort by some 50 Catholic scholars, using the best of modern scholarship to bring a fresh and accurate translation to the American Catholic community.

The first edition was published in 1970; the New Testament was revised in 1986, and the Psalms in 1991.

The translating principle behind the ***NAB*** was "to accurately reflect the nuance and form of biblical Hebrew and Greek, while recasting the language to make it compatible with the rules and styles of modern English and in harmony with traditional Catholic interpretations of Scripture."

This is the version that has been adopted by the US Bishops for the Lectionary (for the readings at the celebration of Mass and the other Sacraments).

The ***NAB*** provides a short introduction to each book of the Bible, and for certain major sections (such as the Pentateuch).

The ***NAB*** is also available in an expanded study edition, under the title *The Catholic Study Bible*. This supplements the existing introductions with thorough and comprehensive 577-page Reading Guide.

The entire text of the ***NAB***, with introductions (but not including the Reading Guide) is consultable online at:

http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0839/_INDEX.HTM

NJB
New Jerusalem Bible

The *Jerusalem* in the title is to acknowledge that this edition is inspired by the work of the Dominican *École Biblique* in Jerusalem which produced the first edition of the *Bible de Jérusalem* in 1961. A first English edition, was published in 1966 under the title the *Jerusalem Bible*. The English edition imitated its French predecesor, translating the notes and introductions from the French, but the biblical texts were translated directly from the Hebrew, Greek or Aramaic.

The team of editors for the English edition was chosen not only for their scriptural expertise, but also for their literary competence; for example, the original team included J.R.R. Tolkien.

A revised French edition was published in 1973, which led to the 1985 publication of the English update, the *New Jerusalem Bible*. The revisions to the translation make the ***NJB*** more literal and less literary than its predecessor. The notes and introductions were thoroughly revised and expanded from the first edition. These "extras" make it one of the most scholarly editions of the Bible.

NRSV
New Revised Standard Version

The *New Revised Standard Version* is a revision of the *Revised Standard Edition* (published in 1952), which was a revision of the *American Standard Version* (published in 1901), which in turn was compiled from earlier revisions of the *King James Version* (published in 1611).

The style of English adopted was explicitly "to continue in the tradition of the *King James Bible*, but making whatever changed were felt necessary for accuracy, clarity, euphony, and current English usage": all summed in the maxim "As literal as possible; as free as necessary." It is essentially a literal translation, which is why it is one of the best for study purposes (getting the reader as near as possible to the original Hebrew/Aramaic or Greek).

The NRSV Bible Translation Committee was ecumenical: thirty top scholars, from Protestant denominations, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Greek Orthodox Church. The committee also included a Jewish scholar. This translation is the most widely "authorized" by the churches: it is endorsed by thirty-three Protestant churches; it has the imprimatur of the American and Canadian Conferences of Catholic bishops; and it received the blessing of a leader of the Greek Orthodox Church.

The ***NRSV*** is published in an edition "with Apocrypha," that is, including those books which the Catholic Church considers to be part of the Canon of Scripture, even if they are "deutero-canonical" (see explanation on page 9).

GNT
Good News Translation

What is known as the ***Good News Translation*** in North America is known as the *Good News Bible* in the rest of the world. Until 2001, it was also known in North America as *Today's English Version* (a title that was dropped because it mistakenly suggested that it was only a paraphrase and not a genuine translation).

This translation, produced in the 1960s, was influenced by two pastoral factors, one missionary, the other theological. People in Africa and the Far East requested a version of the Bible that was more accessible to non-native English speakers. At around the same time, there was a debate in the US on what is called "dynamic translation" that is, a translation which operates on the principle of "thought for thought" rather than "word for word." The editors of the ***GNT*** decided to adopt this "dynamic translation" principle.

The translation of the New Testament was published in 1966; the translation of the Old Testament followed ten years later. In 1979, an edition which included the Apocrypha/Deutero-canonicals was published.

This is a very popular edition of the Bible, and has been endorsed by the main Christian traditions in the US, including the Catholic Church. Its simple, everyday language has proved particularly popular with younger people. The ***GNT*** offers introductions to each book of the Bible.

This Bible's strongest feature is also its weakest. The simplicity of the language makes it an excellent tool for getting people started on reading the Bible, especially if they are not used to extended reading in English. However, the simplification that this entails means it is not a reference for serious Bible study, where the reader needs to get as close as possible to the original written text.

NIV
New International Version

The *New International Version,* published in 1978, was produced by an international, trans-denominational team (not including the Catholic Church) of over 100 scholars, sponsored by the International Bible Society.

Their aim was to produce "an accurate translation . . . that would have clarity and literary quality." The translators describe their first concern as being "the accuracy of the translation and its fidelity to the thought of the biblical writers." Their work was then submitted to stylistic consutants, who tested it "for clarity and ease of reading." Both translators and consultants were motivated by a "concern for clear and natural English . . . idiomatic but not idiosyncratic, contemporary but not dated."

The ***NIV*** is also published in a study edition which gives introductions detailing its background and purpose, explores themes and theological significance, and points out special problems and distinctive literary features. These introductions are consultable on the web:

http://www.ibs.org/niv/studybible/index.php

7. Creating the Right Environment

Environment is a key factor in assuring the success of a group. The surroundings can help to set the mood, to keep everyone focused and on track, and to help build the sense of community that is so essential to the keeping thegroup together.

You may find it useful to think of environment in three different ways:

— **exterior environment**,
or what goes on around you
— **interior environment**
or what goes on within you
— **relational environment**
or what goes on among you

Exterior Environment

- Comfortable
- Hospitality
  - — restroom nearby
  - — perhaps drinks/snacks, but preferably in an area distinct from where the sharing takes place
  - — welcome at arrival
- One group
  - — equal level of seating for all members
  - — no person blocked by another
  - — single-file circle
- Same place and similar set-up for each meeting
- Same focal point
  - — Bible,
  - — candle,
  - — prayer cloth
- Prayer and Sharing in a space set apart
  - — set snacks and drinks aside
  - — dim the lights
  - — open the Bible
  - — light the candle(s)
  - — invite to a moment of quiet
- Be prepared
  - — have everything ready to go:
    - CD player and song cued
    - seats in place
    - focal point ready

Interior Environment

- Preparation for session
- Attitude of prayer and openness
- Set aside concerns and tasks

Relational Environment

- Respect for all members of the group
- Know everyone by name, and address them by name
- Confidentiality about what is shared among the group (except life, health, safety, and criminal activity)
- Emotionally safe place
- Time for gathering and greeting
- Reflective/Active listening
- Thank people for sharing
- Ritual closing
  - — group hug
  - — reminder of next meeting
  - — hugs
  - — blow out the candle(s)
  - — close the Bible
  - — turn lights back up

Closing Prayer
Lectio Divina on Matthew 17:1-9

Preparation

Spend a moment quieting yourself and becoming aware of the presence of God.
Then pray the following Gospel passage as a Lectio Divina
(see the explanation of Lectio Divina *at the foot of the facing page).*

Scripture ***Matthew 17:1-9***

Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John
and led them up a high mountain, by themselves.
And he was transfigured before them,
and his face shone like the sun,
and his clothes became dazzling white.
Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah,
talking with him.
Then Peter said to Jesus,
"Lord, it is good for us to be here;
if you wish, I will make three dwellings here,
one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."
While he was still speaking,
suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them,
and from the cloud a voice said,
"This is my Son, the Beloved;
with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"
When the disciples heard this,
they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.
But Jesus came and touched them, saying,
"Get up and do not be afraid."
And when they looked up, they saw no one
except Jesus himself alone.

As they were coming down the mountain,
Jesus ordered them,
"Tell no one about the vision
until after the Son of Man
has been raised from the dead."'