

OVERVIEW OF THE BIBLE

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The Bible is NOT;

- Just another history book that is meant to be read literally, it is written in many different genres.
 - Another set of religious laws that is to be applied for all living cultures and historical times.
 - A direct message from God that has come straight from heaven without any human influence in the way the words have been composed.
 - A compendium of morality that is meant to be applied for people in all times and within all cultures.
- Many of the moral issues today were not even thought possible during biblical times such as the reality of In Vitro Fertilisation, Euthanasia or the religious views on legalising Same Sex unions.

- A scientific book that gives scientific explanations to the workings of the sun, moon or universe, this is a whole different way of looking at reality. The Church authorities were very wrong in condemning the astronomer Galileo when he said that the earth circled around the sun. Many centuries later a belated apology was made.

What the Bible Is

The word 'bible' comes from the Greek plural word '*ta biblia*' which means 'the books'. In fact, the Bible contains 73 books that have been assembled over a thousand years.

Before the bible was written down, the contents were shared orally by like minded community groups and then lived by small groups of people.

The bible is a book that contains a large number of mostly unknown authors who played their part in editing, rewriting and updating the biblical texts. So the Gospel writers had their scribes and editors who helped put their reflections in order.

In the late 3rd century the writings of what has become known as the first or Old Testament and the Second or New Testament were all collected and after much prayer and study the bishops of the Church recognised a definitive number as being inspired and given the privileged place of being "the words of God".

The bible reflects God's presence in many forms and life situations, both good and bad.

By its very structure, the bible provides many ways of looking at things, so it still leaves plenty of room for analysis and research by people in all times and cultures. This is an ongoing work where biblical scholars have a knowledge of ancient languages, social and economic systems so as to put the bible in a true context.

The main STAGES of Biblical History

Biblical history is not strictly based upon what we would now call chronological times, rather it is based upon significant political, social and religious events that have shaped the times in which things were said and events happened..

So a brief biblical 'panorama' could be broken down into the following events:

1) **PATRIARCHIAL period** (1850-1250BC)

This stage, covered in the book of Genesis, traces the call of Abraham, his travels, the settling of the tribe in Canaan and his descendants in Egypt.

2) **LIBERATION era** (1250-1200BC)

After several centuries of captivity in Egypt, the descendants of Abraham underwent a harsh slavery. Then Moses under God's mysterious inspiration helped them to escape from Egypt and to organise themselves into a law that evolved from a divine authority. This stage is especially covered in the book of Exodus.

3) **SETTLING IN era** (1035-932BC)

This new land also known as Canaan as well as Israel is progressively occupied sometimes peacefully and other times amidst armed struggles both internally and externally.

4) **The KINGSHIP era** (1035-932BC)

Here the 12 tribal federation is replaced by a monarchy with Kings Saul, David and Solomon who built the great temple in Jerusalem. The ordinary Jewish people became more and more subject to being oppressed and unjustly taxed by the authorities so as to build more public and religious institutions.

5) **The era of the PROPHETS** (932-587BC)

Upon the death of King Solomon there was a revolt between the northern territory known as Samaria, who were overwhelmed by the Assyrians in 721BC, and the southern territory being Judah under the onslaught of King Nebuchadnezzar in 587BC. The prophets of the north were Elijah, Amos and Hosea, and in the south were Isaiah, Micah, Zephaniah and Jeremiah. A prophet's role was really to challenge people to being righteous.

6) **The era of the SECOND EXILE** (587-538BC)

Here the people of Israel lost everything; its land, temple royalty and for many of them, their self confidence. The years of exile in Babylon proved hard but fruitful, here a large part of the Old Testament was written and rewritten in this period.

7) **The Time of HOPE** (538-6BC)

After the return from Exile, various foreign occupations occurred, the Persian and Greek (from 332BC) then the Roman occupation from 63BC.

Many of the Jewish people became expatriates throughout the Mediterranean basin, they formed 'the Diaspora', it was the true golden age where the Psalms and the Wisdom books were written.

8) **The Period of JESUS of NAZARETH** (6BC-34AD)

Here Jesus was born, grew up and shared the life of his people. He is recorded speaking, acting with and in time being rejected by his own people.

9) The Springtime of **CHRISTIANITY** (34-100AD)

All of the writings of the New Testament date from these years, the first book written was the Acts of the Apostles.

The Lands of the Bible

The original name of Israel was Palestine. It is a small land that is situated between two great centres of civilisation. It is about the same size as the Australian state of Victoria.

To the east is the country of Mesopotamia that is divided between the rivers of the Euphrates and the Tigris, then to the north is Lebanon, to the south is Egypt and to the east the Mediterranean Sea.

Within the country of Israel the territory of Galilee has a lake surrounded by rich fertile land. It is so different from Judea to the south that has a distinct rough, barren landscape, between Galilee and Judea is the Gentile state of Samaria.

The Bible as a LOVE STORY

There are a number of sacred religious books that all have elements of truth in them and because of this they deserve to be respected. This is the great message of Vatican II that the bishops want all of the Church's faithful people to uphold.

Perhaps the best known religious book other than the Bible is '*the Koran*' which belongs to the people of Islam and has evolved since their holy Prophet Mohammad who authored most of it.

All of the sacred book are witnesses to a humanity that is seeking a God in and by a mystery. But none of them points to the discovery of God other than the Bible as a love story between God and His people. This is what makes the Bible so distinctive from all of the other main-line religious books, it is meant to convey a God who deeply loves his people.

The OLD TESTAMENT or the FIRST COVENANT

The books of the bible can be collectively grouped in the following ways: there are 46 books

- 1) ***The Pentateuch***; this is the historical, legislative and theological basis of the Old Testament or Covenant that comprises the books of ***Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy***.
- 2) ***The Historical Books***; these books look at different aspects of the history of Israel from the time of 1200BC until the threshold of the New Testament being about 100BC. These book were the books of ***Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Tobit, Judith, Esther and 1 & 2 Maccabees***.
- 3) ***The Poetic and Wisdom Books***; contain maxims of human wisdom and reflections on it. ***Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Wisdom, Sirach or Ecclesiasticus***.

- 4) *The Prophetic Books*; these books bear witness to the vigorous activities of some men of God who are seeking to awaken the conscience of Israel. They are ***Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Baruch, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi***.

The New Testament or the Second Covenant

This is the second part of the Bible that only makes sense if the people who read it believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the son of God who has risen from the dead.

It emphasises the four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, the various letters of St Paul and other writers as well as the book of Revelation or the Apocalypse. It was probably written between 55 and 95AD. The New Testament should always be written in light of the resurrection of Jesus as this was the catalyst that shaped it.

Appreciating the Bible in Time and Space

The Bible is written over time. It actually lasts about 2000 years, from 1900BCE until 100BCE.

Contemporary Science Tells Us

To appreciate this in the wider context of life, contemporary science tells us that the first human beings could well have appeared about 5 million years ago. If we reduce this period to a single day then biblical history would be a mere 6 minutes!

The authors of the bible join the beginning and the end of time together. The first words of the Bible are "*In the beginning was the word*", and the last few words in the book of Revelation are "*Come, Lord Jesus*". The first words of John's Gospel is '*The Word has become flesh*'.

In space, the bible is centred in a small space, this being the land of Israel and its surrounding countries. So it is a little dot on the universe. It is estimated that in the time of Jesus there were about 5 million people in Israel, while there were about 4 million people in the rest of the known world. So the bible is a work that is rooted in a time and place, yet it is written for people in all times and places.

The Problem of Fundamentalism

Essentially a 'fundamentalist' is someone who takes something out of the context in that it has been written and is to be understood. So history is not meant to be understood as poetry or wisdom and when a religious truth is expressed within a story form then the story is not meant to be taken literally.

We all in conversation express our feelings, our emotions by way of humour, exaggeration and poetic license, we hope that the person listening to us is able to appreciate the nuance in what we

are saying. That is why someone can fail the value of a text if they interpret it within the wrong context.

A true story to make clear where something is taken out of context concerns an ordination cake where on the cake the newly ordained priest had the words 'To serve not to be served'. When he was to be toasted only half the cake came out as the other half was cut in half and put in the fridge, the words 'to serve' was very misunderstood!

The Catholic Appreciation of Word and Tradition

It's important that we remember from the Church's beginnings there were so many written reports about the life and teachings of Jesus Christ and also of the experiences of the early Church members, especially St Paul who founded so many communities beyond Israel. So after many years of discernment the bishops of the Church held a council and in the year 367 the official list of inspired books of the Bible were announced. These books became known as '*The Canon*' of the Bible. The Church has always reserved the right to determine which books were 'canonical' and which were not. The Church's teaching authority determine the true context in which the bible text is meant to be understood.

This is consistent with what Jesus said to Peter and the apostles in the Gospel "*What you tighten on earth will be tightened in heaven and what you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. I have given you the keys of the kingdom*".

So there are 46 books of the Old Testament and 27 books of the New Testament that were officially declared. There was a big debate during the time of the Reformation as to who were authentic biblical authors and who were not, and because of this, especially in the Old Testament, there are some of the 46 books not recognised by some of the Protestant churches. The dilemma of many Protestant churches is that they have no official on-going source of authority on how God's word is meant to be interpreted.

The Role of the Homilist

The role of the Homilist is not to repeat the scriptural texts or to give a lecture as to how they have been composed and their technical meanings, this is the role of a scriptural scholar when he or she teaches.

The role of the homilist is to look at a text and highlight some features of it that can then be best understood within a modern context. It is the practical application of a text within people lives. It is very much like a sports commentator who is there to highlight to the viewer or listener what is happening within a context that they can best understand. Some people definitely do this better than others, very much like some teachers can simplify a subject better for their students than other teachers!