

## Other Forms of Help

In the Bible God's word comes in books written by human beings. Is it surprising that readers should be helped to understand those books through other human beings, and not simply through direct divine guidance?

Auxiliary guidance to biblical meaning comes chiefly through two channels, one factual, the other more spiritual.

■ **First**, scholars have studied the biblical books intensively. Scholars make mistakes; they do not always agree. Still, their majority opinion can be a good guide to the dating of books, the circumstances in which they were written, and the kind of literature they represent.

For instance, most scholars judge that the Gospel according to John was written in Asia Minor between 90 and 100 A.D. The three other books we call the Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark and Luke—were written earlier.

■ **Second**, the history of God's people casts light on the inspired library. In other words, Christians can get help by reading or hearing the Bible in the context of church tradition.

Christians of the past have already debated what many biblical passages mean; we are their heirs. Those with Scripture training can help us understand God's words through their preaching and teaching.

## *An Illustration*

### How to Learn About Jesus

It may be helpful to see how the approach to Scripture suggested in the accompanying box on studying the Bible throws light on a particular area, the Gospels.

Most Christians have formed their own image of Jesus by pulling together what they have heard or read about Him, and what they have seen in religious movies—all of this colored by their religious needs and experiences.

This image is certainly not to be discarded. Yet very rarely will it be the same as the portrait painted by any one of the four Gospels! How does one go about reading the Gospels to enrich one's understanding of Jesus?

## Are the Gospels Biographies?

To start with the library question, on which shelf should the Gospels be placed? Under biography? Biographies usually start with the subject's parentage and birth. Drawing on all available data, they try to recount dispassionately the career and importance of the subject.

But two of the Gospels never mention Jesus' birth; Mark does not even give the name of His legal father (Joseph) and John does not give the name of His mother. None gives any details of Jesus' years between age 12 and 30!

The accounts of His public life are not complete and are not dispassionate; they are written to convince. John is specific:

*Jesus also performed many other signs . . . not recorded in this book, but these have been recorded so that you may have faith.* (Jn. 20:30-31)

Also, when the various Gospels report the same scene, the thrust is often different.

## From Preached Tradition

If not biographies, what then are the Gospels? A common approach today relates them to preaching.

The early followers of Jesus who had been with Him during His ministry preached about Him to different audiences. They would have selected from memories of His words and deeds what would give people insight into Jesus and thus facilitate conversion.

The Gospels may be classified as written accounts composed on the basis of such preaching.

Think of an evangelist addressing in writing a believing community. He would have chosen material from the preached collections of Jesus' sayings and deeds and from other items of tradition known to him (and probably to the community); and he would have woven this material into a consecutive account to meet the pastoral needs of his readers.

What emphasis in presenting Jesus would best serve to encourage, to persuade, or to correct? We use the English verb "evangelize" to cover such goals, and the Gospels (Latin, "evangelia") are works of evangelization.

## Four Unique Understandings

In the Gospels, then, we have different portraits of Jesus. No one of them exhausts the mystery of Jesus, and their variations make Jesus understandable in different circumstances to different readers.

If one were to imagine a precious stone exhibited in the middle of a room, from different angles one would see different aspects of the beauty; and from no single vantage point could one see all.

In Mark 15:34 Jesus says, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"; in John 16:32 Jesus says, "I am never alone, for the Father is with Me." Both statements are true in illustrating the relationship to God of one who was both human and divine. At different moments of life, one or the other may give an understanding of Jesus that enables a Christian to face suffering.

Because the personal reading of Scripture can be profitably correlated with the Sunday Scripture reading in church, it is no accident that now the liturgies in many churches follow one Gospel consistently. Modern scholarship and the church are as one in recognizing the uniqueness and integrity of the way in which each Gospel shows us how to understand Jesus.

This then is how Scriptures instruct for salvation. But one thing more is necessary. Jesus Himself pointed to it in a story told by Luke (11:28).

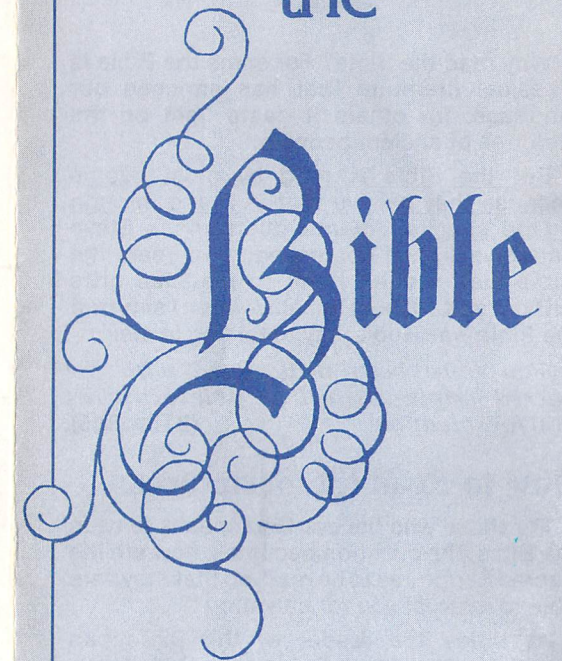
He reports that a woman who heard Jesus speak cried out, "Blessed is the womb that bore You." And Jesus answered, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it."

I am sorry for those who do not read the Bible every day; I wonder why they deprive themselves of the strength and the pleasure. It is one of the most singular books in the world, for every time you open it, some old text that you have read a score of times suddenly beams with a new meaning.

There is no other book that I know of...that yields its meaning so personally, that seems to fit itself so intimately to the very spirit that is seeking its guidance.

Woodrow Wilson

# Understanding the





As Eleanor Schmidt of Florida tells the story, her doctor had recommended surgery and referred her to a specialist. Arriving at the surgeon's office early, she found him seated at the receptionist's desk reading the Bible.

"Does reading the Bible help you before or after an operation?" she asked. Softly he answered, "During."

Why read the Bible? For some the Bible is classical literature that has enriched our language; for others it casts light on the histories of ancient peoples.

But the Bible is read by most people because they believe that in it and through it God speaks. Atlanta quarterback Steve Bartkowski once confessed, "For years the Bible was a dead book to me...like grits without salt... It became alive when I saw that the Bible was God's way of talking to me."

*You have been acquainted with the Sacred Scriptures which are able to instruct you for salvation.* (2 Tim. 3:15).

## How to Read the Scriptures

For those who believe God speaks to us in the Bible, the question becomes: how are the Sacred Scriptures to be read, so that they "are able to instruct you for salvation"?

At times the reader of the Bible can dispense with "how to" guidance. Despite the gaps of time and language that separate us from the biblical writings, many of their pages are almost immediately intelligible.

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For instance:

■ The Psalms, as they speak of God, run the gamut of the human situation from lyric joy to anguished suffering. To human beings who share the same experiences, the psalmists' words are most intelligible.

■ The vivid examples of Jesus drawn from the flowers of the field and the birds of the air need little commentary for those who have walked in a meadow in the spring.

■ The parables of Jesus often involve fundamental human reactions.

In short, the Bible was not written for specialists, and frequently the basic religious thrust is apparent without exposition.

## But Not All Is Obvious

*The literal sense of a passage is not always as obvious in the speeches and writings of the ancient authors of the East as it is in the works of our own times.*

(Pope Pius XII)

While the Bible is the word of God for all times, the authors were not writing to men and women of the 20th century. They were writing to people of 2,000 or 3,000 years ago and addressing issues of those times. After they wrote, some of their words were combined and edited, adapting the meaning to meet other situations.

Thus there are complications for the modern reader. That's why it's helpful to have an edition of the Bible that has footnotes and some reference material.

As you read the Bible, questions will spill over into your mind from your general education. An exposure to an elementary General Science textbook will cause the reader of Genesis, the first book of the Bible, to wonder if the world really came into being in six days, or the reader of Joshua to wonder what the author could possibly mean by reporting that the sun stood still and did not move toward setting for almost a day.

Some help is needed by the reader to distinguish between a religious view that the biblical author was earnestly communicating and the prescientific outlook of his times that he took for granted but had no dream of imposing on future generations. Knowing this distinction can help you understand the kind of book the author intended to write.

## Practical Ways of Studying the Bible

Because we are not the first people to ask how to understand the Scriptures, we can profit from others engaged in the same search. Here are some ideas that may be serviceable:

■ **Be choosy.** Use a Bible that has an introduction to each book and footnotes, helping readers to understand the issues involved.

■ **Read selectively.** At first, instead of attempting to read the Bible through from cover to cover, select books that are easier or more interesting. In the Old Testament start with Genesis, Exodus, 1-2 Samuel and—although the Prophets are difficult—Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Hosea. In the New Testament, try a Gospel of your choice, Acts, 1 Corinthians, Philipians, Ephesians and Titus.

■ **Vary your reading.** Try interspersing

these readings with passages from the Psalms that will help you to pray while you are digesting intellectually.

■ **Add some background.** If this reading succeeds in arousing your interest, try working through a popular introduction to the Old Testament and to the New in order to acquire a general picture that will help you as you try a second read-through covering the more difficult books. Further help can be found in pamphlet commentaries on individual books of the Bible; some of these have the biblical text on the same page as the commentary.

■ **Follow the church year.** The choice of passages for reflection might be suggested by correlation with the passages being read in your church on Sundays. That brings the sermon and the liturgy to complement the aid received from scholarship.

## What Kind of Book?

*The Bible is not just a book; it is a library in itself, a set of books of every different type of literature.*

(Pope Paul VI)

Yet in what Christians call the Old Testament and Jews call simply the Holy Scriptures there are some 39 to 46 individual books—Catholic Bibles contain more books than the Bibles used by Jews and most Protestants.

In the New Testament there are 27 books. Recognized in faith to contain God's guidance for His people, these books represent the preserved library of Israel and of the early Church.

When someone walks into a modern library and asks for a book, the librarian might ask, "What kind of book? History, biography, fiction, poetry, drama?"

The library has such sections neatly marked off. Often too there is a dust jacket on a book explaining more immediately what it is about.

Without such guides readers could easily become confused. If a spy thriller about Nazi secrets was misplaced into the history section, or a Sherlock Holmes collection misplaced into the biography section, readers might well think these were accounts

of what had actually happened. Our expectations are shaped by the type of literature we think we are reading.

Unfortunately the biblical library does not come to us so neatly classified, and there are no dust jackets on the individual books.

Is the Book of Jonah history or parable? Is the Song of Songs or Canticle of Canticles a poem of earthly love between a man and a woman or an allegory of the spiritual love of God for his people?

To know what kind of individual book they are opening, readers of the Bible need help.

## So, Help Me God

*All Scripture is inspired by God.*

(2 Tim. 3:16)

Is this not God's word? Will God not help the reader? The answer to both questions is yes, but what kind of help is the issue.

God's inspiration guarantees that the biblical books teach without error that truth which He intended for the sake of our salvation. But inspiration does not tell the reader whether that truth is being conveyed by history, by parable, by poetry, or in another way. There is a wide range of literature in the Bible, including some literary types no longer current today.