



THE BIBLE WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT? 27 November 2019

BACKGROUND TO THE YEAR

1600th anniversary of the death of St Jerome in 420 – the priest who translated the Bible from Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek into Latin, the basis of what is still the Church's authoritative text (the *Vulgate*); ALSO (i) decline in knowledge of the Bible among many and (ii) historically low level of knowledge of Bible among Catholics – what is the background to this? Paradoxically modern technology has made the Bible more accessible, at least to people in developed societies, than at any time in history, together with studies and commentaries (although on the Internet there is also a lot of stuff about the Bible which needs to be avoided).

WHAT THE CHURCH TEACHES

We believe that God has revealed himself to us: he's revealed what he is like, and also revealed to us something about how we should live as his creatures. The supreme revelation of God is in the person of Jesus Christ. Part of how God has revealed all this to us is through the writings we treat as sacred Scriptures, which we believe were written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The Church gradually decided which books were to be in the Bible, and so has the authority to interpret the Bible. There are different ways in which we read the Bible and see it as the Word of God: we acknowledge that the biblical books are incomplete in some respects and also contain historical problems and errors and moral outlooks which need to develop further and change.

THE BIBLE IN THE MASS

We also mark this year the fiftieth anniversary of the cycle of Bible readings we use at Mass in Catholic churches on Sundays and weekdays. For Sundays this is a three year cycle, covering one of the first three gospels (known as 'Synoptic') each year, with the gospel of John every year in the Easter season. Both on Sundays and weekdays for the first time an extensive series of readings from the Old Testament was included – prior to this Catholics only heard the OT read at Mass on some weekdays, never on Sundays. The 1969 cycle of readings was designed to help Catholics know the Bible better in the Mass, explicitly called for in Vatican II.

WHICH VERSION?

Most of the Old Testament, which is the Bible of Jewish people, was written in Hebrew. Some parts of the book of Daniel are in Aramaic, a closely related to Hebrew (and the language spoken by Jesus). The Hebrew was translated into Greek for Greek – speaking Jews in the 2nd century BC, a version known as the *Septuagint*. Some books are in this version but not in the Hebrew (parts of Esther and Daniel, and the books of Ecclesiasticus, Wisdom, Baruch, Tobit, Judith and 1 and 2 Maccabees). The books of the New Testament were written in Greek. The principal Latin version was produced by St Jerome in the late 4th century, known as the *Vulgate* (this was updated in 1979, which is the official Catholic text). Translations into English appeared towards the end of the Middle Ages, and various Protestant versions became popular in this country from the time of Henry VIII, culminating in the Authorised Version in 1611. For Catholics the first authorised English translation, from the late 16th and early 17th century, is known as the *Douai-Rheims* Bible (produced by Catholic exiles in France and Belgium), revised by Bishop Challoner in the 18th century. Monsignor Ronald Knox published his translation of the Bible in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Until Vatican II Catholic versions had to be translations of the Latin, not the Hebrew and Greek, and co-operation with non-Catholics was discouraged; this then changed and Catholic versions, sometimes ecumenically produced, are all from the original languages.

At Mass in this country the version normally used is *The Jerusalem Bible*, a fresh translation from the original languages produced in 1966. There have been two revisions of this but they're not used at Mass. It is important for Catholics to use and possess a *Catholic* Bible. The reason is that most Bibles used by Anglican and

Protestants are incomplete. The Old Testament books which are in the Greek version of the Old Testament but not the Hebrew were rejected as part of Scripture by the Protestant Reformers in the 16th century. The 'King James Bible', or 'Authorised Version', the version still available in most secular bookshops, is not authorised for use by Catholics (in most places). Good versions for us are the three versions now of the *Jerusalem Bible* (the latest revision has just been published), Catholic versions of the Revised Standard Version and the 'Community Bible'. The *New International Version* is not authorised for Catholics. Canon Law in our Church requires that versions of the Bible have (approved) introductions and footnotes

WAYS OF READING THE BIBLE

The Church now endorses what is called *Historical Criticism* of the Bible: that is, reading the books with due attention to their historical setting, authorship, relation to other books, different layers of composition, use of language and so on. This helps us understand, for example that the first five books of the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) are in fact made up of 4 distinct literary sources which evolved gradually over hundreds of years; it also helps us work out the relationship between the first three gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke (that is, did Matthew and Luke have a common source ('Q') is Luke partly dependant on Matthew?); also did St Paul write Ephesians if the Greek style and theology are different from his other letters? It also means we don't take literal historical truth accounts such as the Creation narrative in Genesis or Noah's flood. In good Bibles the brief introductions to the books usually give basic details of these issues.

Alongside this basic method of reading the Church makes use of other ways of studying and thinking about the books – such as the type of language used, the role particular books have played in the life of the Church or the Jewish people, new archaeological discoveries (such as the Dead Sea scrolls after the Second World War, which included some very early Biblical texts), and the insights of sociology and psychology. The Church also welcomes, with some qualifications, contextual readings of Scripture in terms of God's action in history, such as interpretations associated with Liberation and Feminist theology: in the former case, for example, those oppressed in different places have drawn strength from the Exodus story and the Old Testament prophets. The Church disapproves of *fundamentalist* ways of reading the Bible, which take passages out of context and see every word as somehow incapable of being in error. We accept that just as our understanding of the Christian faith develops and changes under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, so does our understanding of the Bible.

TYPES OF BOOK IN THE BIBLE (examples)

History The first five books of the Old Testament, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Maccabees
Prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos
Wisdom literature Proverbs, Wisdom, Ecclesiastes, Psalms, Ecclesiasticus
Edifying stories Tobit, Esther, Daniel, Jonah
Gospels Matthew, Mark, Luke – Acts (the book of Acts is a continuation of the Luke) and John,
Epistles / Letters Romans, Corinthians (Paul) also by Peter, James and John; Hebrews (anonymous)
Apocalyptic Apocalypse / Revelation, parts of Daniel

SOME RESOURCES

The official website of the special year: www.cbcew.org.uk/home/events/the-god-who-speaks

The Bible Society – an ecumenical group which has an office at the Bishops Conference:
www.biblesociety.org.uk

In addition to the versions of the Bible mentioned above:

H Wansbrough *The SPCK Bible Guide* 2013

Pope Benedict XVI *Verbum Domini* http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20100930_verbum-domini.html

Bishops Conference of England and Wales *The Gift of Scripture* 2009
www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources/Scripture/GoS.pdf

Pontifical Biblical Commission *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* 1993

The Inspiration and Truth of Sacred Scripture 2014