

Scripture 101

Studying the Bible, by Gloria Doino

There is an excitement involved in reading Scripture but for the unversed reader it can be both frustrating and confusing at times. Remembering two basic principles can help ease the process:

1. The Bible is both the Word of God and the word of humans
2. The Bible is not a book, but a library

When we read the Bible prayerfully we experience its power to bring us into contact with the living God. At the same time, when the human authors of the Bible show an apparent ignorance of Science, History or even Theology, as we know it today, we tend to wonder why and ask questions. It is well to remember that God transcended these inaccurate ideas to get across his own message. The human authors were not exempt from the limitations of their times and it falls to us to sort out the human from the Divine. There are myriad commentaries and books on Scripture to help us do just that, as well as Bible Studies to instruct us. We need to take ownership and study Scripture with the aid of current media.

The second principle we need to remember is that the Bible is not a book but a library. The 73 books have been written at various dates, over a period of approximately a thousand years, in a variety of literary genres.

Readers often look at the copyright date of a book to place it in time. As we get acquainted with the Bible, we will find great differences, from one book to another, depending on the era it was written in. The story of God's journey with his people, like every story, is the story of a relationship. "God reveals Himself and His will gradually to His people, trying not to overwhelm them at any point with more truth than they can handle. He takes us where we are and leads us to fuller truth." (Sr. Macrina Scott, O.S.F). As the relationship matures, what God tells his people will change. So knowing the culture of time, literary form, audience, and author (or

school of thought) for each book we read, will place the book in its context and help to give it clarity.

Understanding Biblical literary forms is of the essence as well. Genesis, for example, is theology wrapped in symbol. There are books containing history, poetry, hymns, wedding songs, didactic fiction, etc. Every genre has its format and explanation. Having a translation with introductions to each book helps to give the necessary clues required for intelligent reading. The New American Bible, for example, provides such introductions.

Where does one start reading the Bible? Probably not at the beginning. A good starting place is to read the ACTS of the Apostles. This is the story of the early church and especially of St. Paul. Follow that with Paul's letters and you are on your way. From there, you might try to read the first books of the Old Testament and then go back to the Gospels. And, always, there are the Psalms, where you find the history and spirituality of the Old Testament people. Add a commentary such as the Collegeville Bible (Liturgical Press) or the Evangelical Commentary on the Bible (Baker Book House) for your perusal and keep John McKenzie's Dictionary of the Bible on hand for a quick reference.

The scripture is "God's word, with the power to change our lives...If we approach the Bible prayerfully – keeping it in mind that it is both the Word of God and the words of limited human beings and that it is not a book but a library – we will discover the spiritual nourishment that God has placed there for us." (Sr. Macrina Scott, O.S.F.)

There are many ways to study the Bible, but the important thing is to begin.