



# **INSIDE THE HOLY BOOK**

## *Initiation to the Holy Bible*

*by*

***Fr. Lorenzo Carraro, MCCJ***

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# Introduction

This booklet intends to give the basic and elementary concepts which are needed in order to be able to approach the book of the Bible with profit.

The suggested method is to follow the initial explanation of the concepts by immediately reading the passages of the Bible which are the foundation of the same concepts.

There is no better method of approaching the Sacred Scriptures than to open the book and read. Every explanation comes later and in consequence.

The guided reflection and assimilation of these basic concepts about the Book of God give us a certain serene assurance in approaching the Sacred Text and free us from many prejudices which are the result of ignorance. With my best wishes of a joyful study of God's Word,

Yours in Christ,

*P. Lorenzo Carraro, MCCJ*

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# 1

## FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION GOD SPEAKS

*The God of the Bible reveals himself to people: Abraham, Moses, Elijah. The peak of God's revelation is when the Word became flesh in Jesus Christ.*

The God of the Bible in his wisdom and goodness reveals himself. He reveals himself to people: Abraham, Moses, the Prophets. Their experience with God is as much mysterious as God himself, but from them we receive God's word. We obey and believe with them and worship the goodness of God with them.

With deeds and words, God reveals himself and his plan of loving goodness which he decreed from all eternity in Christ. According to his plan, all people, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, are to share in the divine life as adopted sons and daughters in the only begotten Son Jesus Christ. This is God's Plan of Salvation.

God's plan is our destiny and it was decided from all eternity, even before we were created. This is call "Predestination". This is the content of the Gospel, the Good News: "God desires all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:5). Jesus Christ is the Truth. He must be preached to all and believed by all. This revelation is transmitted by the Apostolic Tradition.

### *The Transmission of Divine Revelation*

The Apostolic Tradition is the Living and Believing Community of the Church (the preaching, the witnessing, the leadership, the worship, the life) that started at the time of the Apostles and continued throughout the times up to now.

This revelation when written down becomes Scripture which is read and kept throughout the generations by the believing community and its leaders. Tradition, Bible and Magisterium (the teaching leadership) are the three elements in the transmission of God's word throughout time.

To this tradition the Bible belongs. It is this tradition that makes known to the community of the Church the "Canon" (official list) of the Sacred Scriptures(the Holy Bible) and teaches how to read and interpret them, making them effective for the life and holiness of the community.

A special place is that of the “Magisterium”, i.e. the Bishops with the Pope (Hierarchy or Sacred Leadership): they have the task of supervising and protecting the Christian Heritage (*Depositum Fidei*) that belongs to all the faithful. Tradition, Scriptures and Magisterium are all necessary and need each other. None of them can stand by itself.

They are all aspects of the Living and Believing Community of the Church.

### ***The Rule of Life***

The Scriptures (The Bible) are like a mirror in which the living and believing community looks continually to see if it is faithful to the teaching and example of Jesus. This is why it is called: Rule of Faith (*Regula Fidei*) and Rule of Life (*Regula Vitae*).

The Bible is the written witness of the dialogue between God and Humanity. To God’s revelation corresponds humanity’s reception. Jesus is the highest point of God’s revelation and, at the same time, of humanity’s reception.

The Bible is Guide to Discipleship, to a valid Christian experience: “All scripture is inspired by God and can profitably be used for teaching, for refuting error, for guiding people’s lives and teaching them to be holy. This is how the man who is dedicated to God becomes fully equipped and ready for any good work” (2 *Timothy* 3:16-17).

The Bible is strength in time of difficulties: “And indeed everything that was written long ago in the Scriptures was meant to teach us something about hope from the examples scripture gives of how people who did not give up were helped by God” (*Romans* 15:4).

### ***Jesus and the Scriptures***

The Risen Jesus taught the Apostles how to read the Scriptures (the Old Testament) because they speak of him and his mission. In the Scriptures, they found a help in order to understand the meaning of the Paschal Mystery i.e. his death and resurrection. They saw that Jesus Christ fulfills the promises of God and the expectations of the people of the Old Testament that are contained in the writings of Old Testament.

This is already present during his life and ministry: Jesus during his preaching, appeals to the Scriptures or it is the evangelist who quotes the scriptures in order to confirm Jesus’ mission like in Matthew 12:15-21. In this passage the evangelist shows that Jesus is the one who fulfills Isaiah’s “*Songs of the Servant of Yahweh*”.

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### ***The Three Stages***

The point of departure is the New Testament that was written by the Apostolic Church. It is in the Bible itself (New Testament) that we find the explanation of the existence of the New Testament and the stages of its formation. What does the Bible say about the Bible?

It says that the first step in evangelization and the founding of the Church is the experience of Jesus by the Apostles. Saint John writes in his first letter: “Something which existed since the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our own eyes, which we have watched and touched with our own hands, the Word of life: this is our theme”

And Saint Peter in his second letter, speaking of the event of the Transfiguration, states firmly: “We ourselves heard God’s voice from heaven, when we were with Jesus on the holy mountain”. The ordinary experience, based on the witness of the five senses: seeing, hearing, touching, tasting and smelling, becomes extraordinary experience after Jesus’ resurrection, but it is still based on the senses. It is the Risen Jesus himself who urges the disciples to touch him since he is not a ghost and he even eats some dry fish in their presence.

Yet, the experience of the senses must become faith, because experience touches the man, but only faith touches God. It is faith which brings us into the presence of God. And the Risen Jesus is God. That is why Jesus tells Thomas who wanted to touch him and indeed touched him: “Stop doubting and believe!”. And immediately Thomas uttered the most beautiful act of faith of the New Testament when he exclaimed: “My Lord and my God”.

### ***The last stage was the writing***

Jesus did not command the disciples to write, but he sent them to preach the Gospel to the whole world with the great commission that we find especially in the conclusion of Matthew’s gospel: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations; baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you. And look, I am with you always; yes, to the end of time”.

After Pentecost, this is what the Apostle did: the Proclamation of the Gospel. Eventually, the Apostles and some of their disciples, under their supervision, put in writing their experience in faith of Jesus Christ, because they knew that “Words fly away but what is written remains”. In this way they followed the tradition that the prophets started, under God’s inspiration, and has produced the Old Testament.



It is recorded in the book of Exodus, for the first time, that Moses himself put in writing the content of the Covenant with God, before reading it to the people and finalizing it by means of a solemn sacrifice. The blood of the sacrifice sealed the Covenant of Yahweh with his chosen people and made holy the “Book of the Covenant”, the first writing of what will become the Holy Scriptures.

The Scriptures were the pride of the people of the Old Testament, they were kept inside the Ark and were considered the best sign of the presence of God in their midst. They are the written record of the salvation history in its first stages and therefore they are essential also to us Christians.

Jesus himself taught the Apostles to read the Scriptures (the Old Testament) because they speak of him and his mission. Jesus Christ fulfills the promises of God and the expectations of the people of the Old Testament that are contained in the writings of Old Testament itself as he points out to the two disciples of Emmaus, after his resurrection.

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# 3

## THE CHOICE OF THE BELIEVING COMMUNITY

*The official list of the books of the Bible is called “Canon” which means: rule, measure. The books included in the Canon are called “canonical”. The Canon has a story worth knowing.*

The Bible is a collection of books which are many in number and different in quality. It is the living and believing community, the Church, that is responsible for their choice. The official list of the books of the Bible is called “Canon” which means: rule, measure. They are the books that measure up to the truth and goodness of God’s genuine revelation. The books included in the Canon are called canonical.

In the Canon there are 27 books in the New Testament that are accepted by all Christian denominations. For the Old Testament, the Catholic Church accepts 46 books as it was in the *Alexandria Collection*, at the time of the first translation of the Old Testament from Hebrew to Greek, the so called “*Septuaginta*” (seventy).

This translation is very famous and was done around the year 200 before Christ. According to the legendary tradition, the translation was the work of seventy scholars who worked individually, yet the result was miraculously the same. At the time of the Apostles, that was the Old Testament in Greek that was used by the Christian community.

The criteria of choosing the books for the Canon are: divine inspiration and absence of error. The first document of the choice made over time by the Christian community goes back to the end of the II century and is called the *Muratorian List*. It was around the 4<sup>th</sup> century that the Canon was finalized. Eventually, during the Council of Trent, the Canon was the object of a dogmatic definition.

### ***The Deuterocanonical Books***

Seven of the books of the Old Testament were written originally in Greek and didn't need translation. They are: *Tobit*, *Judith*, *1-2 Maccabees*, *Baruch*, *Sirach*, *Wisdom*. They are called “*Deuterocanonical*” because they were added later to the official list. The deuterocanonical books are important because they witness to some truths that are present only in them like life after death (*Wisdom*) and prayer for the dead (*Maccabees*).

The Jewish people do not accept them in their Canon since they follow the *Jerusalem Collection* of only 39 books, all in Hebrew. The Protestants follow the Jewish canon, but recently add the deuterocanonical books to their Bibles, placed all together in a separate section. “Apocryph” are books about Jesus that are often contemporary of the canonical, but don't show inspiration or are full of errors. They lack credibility and were excluded from the Canon.

### ***The Classification***

The most common classification of the books of the Bible goes like this: in the Old Testament we have first the Pentateuch which includes the first five books (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy). They are the most important and are called the Law (Torah).

Then come the Historical Books (Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Esra, Nehemiah, Tobit, Judith, Ester, 1 and 2 Maccabees (16); then the Wisdom Books: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Qoheleth or Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Wisdom and Sirach or Ecclesiasticus (7).

Last come the Prophetic Books (18). The four Major Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah (with Lamentations and Baruch), Ezekiel and Daniel are followed by the twelve Minor Prophets: Amos, Hosea, Micah, Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, Obadiah, Joel and Jonah. All together the Old Testament is made up of 46 books.

As for the New Testament, the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) and the Acts of the Apostles can be called Historical (5). The letters can be considered Wisdom Books (21). Of them 14 belong to Saint Paul: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon and Hebrews. Then come the Letters so called Catholic because they are addressed to all Christians, not to a group or an individual. They are 7: James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2 and 3 John and Jude. The last book, Revelation, is definitely Prophetic. All together they number 27.

## *The One and Only Book*

We must not think of the 73 books of the Bible as standing side by side on a bookstore or library shelf. Although very different from each other, they are the one and only book: God's Book. The unity of the Bible is made by Jesus Christ. He is the point of arrival of God's plan of salvation which is displayed throughout the whole Bible.

“In the fullness of time, God, who had communicated with us in different ways and in various times through our ancestors, the Prophets, has spoken to us in the person of his Son whom he appointed heir of all things and through whom he made the ages. He is the reflection of God’s glory and bears the impression of God’s own being” (*Hebrews 1:1-3*).

The most important lines in the whole Bible are these: “The Word became flesh and lived among us” (*John* 1:14) and “For this is how God loved the world: He gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (*John* 3:16).

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# 4

## WHAT IS WRITTEN ENDURES

*The writing of the Bible is a fascinating adventure. The original language of the Old Testament is Hebrew, for the New Testament it is Greek. Since the beginning, the writing was done by hand. In the XV century, the invention of the printing press changed radically the scenario.*

Writing is a medium of human communication which involves the representation of a language through a system of symbols. As human societies emerged, collective motivations for the development of writing were keeping track of wealth, recording history, maintaining culture, codifying knowledge or religious worship.

Broadly speaking, the two systems of writing are the ideographic and the phonetic. The ideographic, like the Egyptian hieroglyphs, is based on stylized representation of the objects one speaks about. This makes the number of graphic signs practically infinite; the phonetic instead is based on writing the sounds produced by the human mouth while naming the objects. The number of sounds is very limited and so we have the Alphabet: one of the greatest human inventions.

The semitic languages were the first to use the Alphabet. Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament, belongs to the semitic group of languages. Their peculiarity is that usually they write only the consonants, leaving the vowels to be guessed by the reader. This can give way to some ambiguity in understanding the meaning.

As a matter of fact, there came a moment in history, around the eighth century after Christ, when the Jewish scholars decided to mark the vowels of the whole Jewish Bible to make sure the meaning. These scholars are called Masorets and the text complete with the vowels is called the Masoretic text from the word “*masorah*” which means “tradition”.

### Some necessary terms

“*Papyrus*” is a tall, reed-like water-plant with thick fibrous stems used by the ancient Egyptians to make paper. “*Papyri*” are manuscripts written on this paper. “*Parchment*” is a heavy paper-like material made from the skin of sheep or goats, used for writing on. “Parchment” is also a piece of this material which has been written on. “*Scroll*” is a roll of parchment for writing on. “Scrolls” are also ancient writings on such a roll. “*Book*” is a number of written or printed sheets of paper

bound together between covers. “*Codex (codices)*” is a handwritten ancient text both in the form of book or scroll.

The writing of the Bible is a fascinating adventure. The original language of the Old Testament is Hebrew, for the New Testament it is Greek. The holy writers wrote by hand on papyrus or parchment. The single text was either in a scroll or book. Each copy was a unique work. The codices of the Bible were kept in churches and monasteries for liturgical use. Very few individuals could afford a full copy of the Bible.

The story of the transmission and preservation of the text of the Bible is the glory of medieval monasticism. This continued until the invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg, a German, who printed the 42-lines Bible, called The Gutenberg Bible, in 1455. Since then it became possible to make the Bible available to the individual Christian, but it is only in the XIX, XX centuries that the people in their totality had access to literacy by means of universal education. We are lucky because we know how to read and can have our own bible.

### **The content and the language**

Translations are there since the beginning and their legitimacy is as traditional as the Bible itself. Already at the time of Jesus there were translations of books of the Jewish Scriptures from Hebrew to Aramaic. They were called *Targumin* (plural of “*Targum*”).

The most famous translation of the whole Jewish Bible into Greek is *The Septuaginta*, as we mentioned before. The most famous translation into Latin was made by Saint Jerome (V century) and it is called *Vulgata* which means “popular”. It was used in the Catholic Church until the Second Vatican Council.

The first to break the spell and do a translation of the Bible into vernacular was Martin Luther and his translation is a masterpiece of the German language. The first English translation of the Bible was made in 1449. It is only in the last century that the Bible was translated in more than 2000 languages.

For many local languages, the Bible is the first book printed in those languages. This movement was encouraged in the Catholic Church by the decision of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) of allowing each people to celebrate the liturgy in their own language and no longer only in Latin.

The legitimacy of the translation rests on the fact that for the Bible the content of the message is more important of the original language in which it was written. All the

To establish the original critical text of the Bible, scholars have to collate the different manuscripts or codices and choose among the thousands of variants.

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*The official, public reading of the Bible is during the Liturgy, the worship of God's people, the Church. The private reading happens in countless forms and fashions.*

The “Private Use” is the reading of the Scriptures by individuals and groups outside the liturgy. The private reading happens in countless forms and fashions. A traditional method of reading the Scriptures that we inherited from the monastic tradition is the *Lectio Divina* that is developed in 5 steps.

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Contemplation (*Contemplatio*) then follows: dwelling affectionately and at length in a detail of the Word of God. The conclusion is Sharing (*Collatio*): if the exercise is done in a group we may be inclined to share some of our reflections with our companions.

### ***The Senses in Scripture***

The first sense to be noticed is the *Literal*: what the text says by itself. This is the first sense to be always understood and which to pay attention to, before considering the other senses. *Allegoric* or *Symbolic* sense happens when the literal sense becomes the first step in order to point to a symbolic meaning which usually refers to Christ. Allegory is a symbol which is developed in all its details.

The *Moral* sense follows: it directs our behavior according to God's guidelines or commandments. The *Spiritual* (and *Eschatological*) sense points to the soul's struggle for holiness in order to reach the final destination, Heaven.

There is also, very important, the *Full Sense* ("Sensus Plenus"): it is what we read in a given text from the perspective of the Risen Christ. It illustrates the principle that only with the knowledge of the Risen Christ we can understand fully the Scriptures. As we wrote before, an example is given by Christ's statement: "I am the good shepherd" if we put it in connection with Psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd...". It is evident that Jesus' statement implies that he is God like Yahweh. That is the full sense of what he says about himself.

## **10 GUIDELINES FOR A PROFITABLE READING OF THE BIBLE:**

1. Don't think that you are the first to read the Bible. Many people in all generations have read, meditated and put it into practice. The best interpreters of the Scriptures are the Saints.
2. The Bible is the book of the Christian Community. Our reading can never be solitary, but must be in the tradition of the Church and under the light of the Holy Spirit.
3. The Bible is "Somebody/Christ". The most important reading is done in the Proclamation of the Word during the liturgy.
4. The center of the Bible is Jesus Christ. Everything therefore must be read in the light of Christ. He is the fulfillment of the Scriptures. Christ is the key for the interpretation of the Bible.
5. The Bible is made of facts/happenings and words. God's revelation is

manifested both by facts and words. The words throw light on the facts. The facts fulfill the words.

6. A good and practical way of reading the whole Bible is to start with the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles, then the Letters, alternating with books of the Old Testament... Some books must be read little by little like Leviticus or the Psalms. The Prophets are the soul of the Old Testament. They deserve a special attention and dedication...
7. The Bible must be conquered like the city of Jericho: surrounding it. Thus, try to see the parallel passages and the references. It takes time and effort, but it is of great profit. St. Augustine used to say: "The New Testament is hidden in the Old. The Old is revealed in the New".
8. The Bible must be read and meditated with the same spirit by which it was written. The Holy Spirit is the main author and interpreter. We must always pray before starting our reading of the scriptures and, at the end, we must give thanks to God.
9. Normally, let us not use the Bible in order to criticize or condemn other people.
10. Every passage of the Bible is set in a historical context and literary form. If we ignore these characteristics we may manipulate the Bible to make it say what it doesn't want to say. It is like taking God's name in vain.

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## 6

## SIGNPOSTS OF TIME AND SPACE

*The time extension covered by the accounts of the Bible is only of about two thousand years and the place where all this happened is the tiny nation of Palestine and yet nothing is more important for the whole world.*

The first eleven chapters of the book of Genesis are generally considered Pre-history and include the account of creation and the presence of the humans on earth from the



creation of the world to the time of Abraham. The actual time extension covered by the rest of the Bible (from the history of Abraham to the book of Revelation) is very short: the Old Testament embraces about 1800 years and the New Testament only 100 years, all together about two thousand years.

They are valued, however, as the most momentous period in human history because they contain the happenings of God's revelation and the climax is the Incarnation: God becoming a human being in Jesus Christ. The place where all this happened is the tiny nation of Palestine. These biblical places and times are of burning present day relevance for Christianity but also for Judaism and Islam.

### ***The Geography of the Bible***

The land of Canaan or Palestine (from the ancient people *The Philistines*) is in Asia, in the Near East. It borders with Egypt (West) Lebanon (East) the Mediterranean Sea (North) and the Arabian desert (South). Egypt belongs to Africa.

The North of Palestine is Galilee, with the Lake of Genneseret (called also Sea of Tiberias), including the towns of Cana, Nain, Capernaum, Nazareth, Caesarea Philippi, Bethsaida and Mount Tabor. Samaria is the area in the middle of Palestine, including the towns of Samaria, Sychar and Mount Gerizim.

Judaea is in the South and includes the city of Jerusalem on mount Zion, Bethlehem, Bethany, Jericho, Hebron, Emmaus. In the extreme South there is the Sinai desert with mount Sinai (Horeb), the gulf of Aqaba and the Red Sea.

Along the length of Palestine runs the river Jordan which comes out of the Lake of Genneseret and ends into the Dead Sea, the place of the two ancient towns of Sodom and Gomorrah. The Eastern side of the river Jordan is the area called Transjordan, at present is the state of Jordan; the Western side is Cisjordan or West Bank.

The great political powers during the biblical time were, in the West, Egypt ruled by the Pharaohs; in the East, the Assyrians (Assyria with capital Nineveh); the Babylonians (capital Babylon); the Persians (Persepolis); the Greek and the Romans.

The land between the two great rivers Tigris and Euphrates, called Mesopotamia (present day Iraq) is the country which Abraham came from in order to go to the land of Canaan as a nomad. The place in Mesopotamia where Abraham came from is called Ur.

This stretch of land touched by the happenings described in the Bible is called by the scholars "The Fertile Crescent" because it is shaped like the rising moon and its

fertility is bordered on the South by the desert: because of this, it attracted the greed of several peoples and is like the stage where the happenings mentioned above took place.

## **HISTORICAL SIGNPOSTS IN THE BIBLE**

### **OLD TESTAMENT**

1850	before Christ (BC): History begins with Abraham
1250	<b>Exodus</b>
1000	King David, king Solomon and the 1 <sup>st</sup> temple
721	Fall of Samaria (Kingdom of Israel) by the Assyrians
587	Fall of Jerusalem (Kingdom of Judah) by the Babylonians
	<b>Exile</b>
538	Return from exile (freedom given by Cyrus, king of Persia) -2 <sup>nd</sup> temple
323	Death of Alexander the Great
167-168	Persecution of king Antiochus Epiphanes and rebellion of the Maccabees
164	Purification of the temple.
63	The Romans conquer Palestine. King Herod, vassal of the Romans, reconstructs the temple -3 <sup>rd</sup> temple

### **NEW TESTAMENT**

**Birth of Jesus** (commonly placed in the year 6 BC)

27	AD (Anno Domini) or CE (Christian Era/Current Era): John the Baptist starts preaching. With his baptism, Jesus starts his public life.
30	Jesus' Death/The Risen Lord
48	Council of Jerusalem
50	1-2 Letters to the Thessalonians (First New Testament writings)
64/67	Martyrdom of Peter and Paul in Rome
70	Fall of Jerusalem/destruction of the city and the temple
95-100	Book of Revelation and death of John, the last of the Apostles. End of The Bible. End of the Apostolic Era.

**Passages that show the importance of the historical and geographical signposts:**

- Genesis 13                      *Abraham and Lot go in different directions*
- Genesis 23                      *The burial place of the Patriarchs*
- Deuteronomy 34:1-12      *Moses sees the promised land from Mount Nebo*



### ***Going to God by affirmation***

The first idea is that God is one: “Listen, o Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord” (*Deuteronomy* 6:4). The word: *monotheism* doesn’t exist in the Bible, but the uniqueness of God is expressed by the contrast between the Living God and the dead nature of the other gods as seen in the strong polemic against idolatry like in *Psalms* 115.

The second idea is that God is good: He rejoices at the goodness of his creatures. “And God saw that all was good” (*Genesis* 1). Especially, he wants us to be good: God’s law: morality. “I am the Lord, your God... You shall not kill” (*Exodus* 20).

Then the God of the Bible is a personal God who wants to communicate with his creatures, with humanity and cares for us. God’s personality and concern for us is witnessed throughout the whole Bible in what we call Salvation History. Already to Abraham, in the beginning, God says: “I will bless you... and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves” (*Genesis* 12:1-5).

God cares for humanity, for his chosen people: “I have seen the affliction of my people... and I have come down to deliver them” (*Exodus* 3:7-8). God wants to have a covenant with his chosen people; he gives them his Law, the content of the covenant, and wants them to understand that the heart of God’s covenant is love (*Psalms* 23, *Psalms* 103).

It is a God who asks for our love: from the Jewish confession of faith, the “*Shema, Israel*” in *Deuteronomy*, 6:4-5: “You shall love the Lord, your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might”, to the countless expressions of love for God in the *Psalms*.

This shows the originality and uniqueness of the Jewish understanding of God that has passed integrally in the New Testament. No servility, no magic, but loving obedience, a mature relationship in a worship that enhances our human dignity.

### ***Going to God by way of negation***

This is the itinerary of transcendence and it is the most remarkable albeit less known of God’s aspects. God is a great mystery: we cannot see God’s glory, his face, only his back (*Exodus* 33:18-33). To see God’s face (or to hear his voice) is to die. This is why people are expected to cover their head when they pray.

The mystery of God is underscored by the traditional prohibition to pronounce the

name of God. The prohibition of the images of God is also stressing the Mystery of God and helping the people to avoid idolatry: to worship the creatures instead of the Creator. The prohibition of making images is strong even nowadays in Judaism and Islam. It is a safeguard for monotheism.

## *Jesus Christ is the New Testament*

In the New Testament, we have the fact of the Incarnation. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we saw his glory” (John 1:14). The fundamental experience of the Apostles is the experience of Jesus, the incarnate Word, an experience that is based on the senses as it is proclaimed so by Saint John in the beginning of his first letter.

The experience of the senses, however, must lead to the leap of faith. This is the lesson of the episode of the doubting Thomas. Jesus yields to Thomas' demand, but he challenges him to go beyond the senses to the leap of faith. Jesus is "the image of the invisible God" (*Colossians* 1:15).

The humanity of “God with us” is the reason of the images of Jesus Christ and consequently Mama Mary and the Saints in the Catholic Church. In the VIII century there was a struggle about the problem of the images. The movement that intended to forbid images and was called Iconoclasm was condemned by the pope and the images remained in the Catholic tradition and gave origin to the masterpieces of art throughout the centuries.

Strictly speaking there is no image of God, but only of Jesus, the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Saints. The opposition to the images, if pushed to the extreme, results in the denial of the Incarnation as it is in Judaism, Islam and also in some sects which consequently cannot call themselves Christian any more.

[illegible]

# 8

## THE HEART OF THE LAW

*The Law is the content of the covenant between God and the Jewish People: the Torah. It is the object of meditation, prayer, love and contemplation. In the New Testament, Jesus is the New Law.*

The Law appears in a very special moment in the history of the chosen people. God has proved his love for them and his faithfulness to the covenant made with their fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob by bringing about the liberation of his chosen people from the slavery of Egypt. Now God brings his people deeper into his covenant giving Moses the Ten Commandments, the Law.

The Law is the content of the covenant for the chosen people: if they want to be God's friends, they must keep God's commandments. There is an essential link between Monotheism and Morality. We cannot please God or worship him if we are bad, if we are crooks. It goes against God's holiness, his goodness.

"Torah", the Law, refers first of all to the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments, and, at the same time, to the historical circumstances of the revelation to Abraham and Moses contained in the first five books of the Scriptures, the Pentateuch. Law, commandments, precepts, ordinances, statutes: these are all terms that we find in Deuteronomy, the second exposition of the Law, more meditative and with greater awareness of the Law as a unique gift of Yahweh.

### *The Heart of the Law is Love*

The authority of the Jewish tradition reposed on the conception of the Covenant. The significance lies in the Israelite belief that the obligation of their laws flowed from the Covenant, that life under the law was the duty which Yahweh's covenant promises laid upon them. All law was ultimately the will of Yahweh and was endowed to a degree with the supreme obligation which was imposed upon Israel through Moses.

The conception of the Law as the revealed will of God has no parallel in other Near Eastern collections of legislation. Hence the conception of law as a sacred covenant obligation is unique with Israel and it is fundamental in the Old Testament idea of society as governed by the will of God, and of history as determined by man's attitude towards the law.

The Prophets, fighting for God and the Covenant against the unfaithfulness of the

people, already point out that the heart of the covenant is love, in this way anticipating and preparing the New Testament: they do this with the divine allegory of Marriage: Yahweh is the husband and the Chosen People are the Bride (*The Song of Songs*).

***“A lamp for my steps”***

After the exile, the Law was no longer the rule of an independent society: Judaism preserved it by making it a guide of life, identifying the law with wisdom and finding in it all knowledge, human and divine. The joy of the Jew in the Law is reflected in the “*Torah Psalms* 19 and 119”. The Torah is object of meditation, prayer, love and contemplation: *Psalm* 119, the longest psalm, is all this. “Lead me in the path of your commandments for I delight in it” (119:35); “Your word is a lamp on my feet and a light on my path” (119:105). This contemplative prayer is born of love for the Law and generates joy.

The Wisdom Books of the Old Testament are centered on the human condition and describe the drama of the human beings subject to fragility and mortality. Yet, it is the appreciation and obedience to God's Law that becomes wisdom by which we are able to recognize the existence of God and appreciate his covenant. "The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord" (*Proverbs* 1:7). This fear is sense of awe, reverence, respect, obedience, love.

The opposite attitude is foolishness or stupidity as it is stated forcefully in the beginning of *Psalms* 14: “The fool said in his heart: There is no God”: this foolishness is a consequence of a corrupt behavior, the disobedience of the Law.

## *Jesus is the Law*

Jesus does not abolish the Ten Commandments: the Beatitudes do not take the place of the Decalogue, but are Jesus' "Blessed Attitudes" that he proposes also to us. Jesus completes and perfects the Law, making it new and showing all the implications (*Matthew* 5:17-48), and yet the two most important commandments, the commandments of love, are taken from the Old Testament.

[illegible]

# 9

## THE THRONE OF GOD

*First the Ark and the Tabernacle, then the Temple are the symbols of Yahweh's presence among his people. In the fullness of time, Jesus' humanity is the real Throne of God's Presence.*

The worship of the Old Testament consisted in sacrifices of animals, performed in an official place, the temple of Jerusalem, by a specialized priestly group, the tribe of Levi. The animals take the place of the human beings (Substitution); the blood, the symbol of life, is the seal of the Covenant: it means that it binds us with the strength of life itself. To violate the Covenant is to deserve to die.

In the beginning, the sacrifices are performed in the open air. Classic examples of sacrifices of animals in very important moments of the history of the Covenant are the one performed by Abram in *Genesis* (15:1-21), where God passes as a flaming torch between the halves of the victims and in *Exodus* (24:1-8), during which Moses sprinkles the blood of the victims on the altar which symbolizes God and then on the people.

### *“The Mercy Seat”*

It is in this moment that the two tablets of the Ten Commandments appear and with them the Ark of the Covenant which is meant to house them. The lid of the ark is plated with solid gold and holds the statues of the two cherubim at the two ends. In the middle is the most sacred space called “The Mercy Seat” or “God’s Throne”. This suggests that the ark was the throne upon which Yahweh stood invisibly upon the cherubim. Since there was no image of Yahweh, only the footstool was represented. God’s Throne is empty.

When David wants to build a temple, God is reluctant to accept: Heaven is his dwelling and the earth his footstool. But Yahweh overlooks his transcendence and enters history: first the Ark and the Tabernacle, then the Temple are the symbols of his presence among his people.

The Ark was the place where atonement was received, where divine communication were granted. It was carried into battle to symbolize Yahweh’s kingship and leadership. It was also the symbol of the Covenant of Yahweh with Israel: He was present because He had elected them as His people and imposed upon them the



Commandment which the Ark contained. The mobile tabernacle which hosted the Ark, was the house of God among his pilgrim people. The shape of the Tabernacle was the model of the future temple.

### ***“The sparrow find herself a home”***

The first temple, David’s dream, was built by Solomon and inaugurated with solemn prayer and abundant sacrifices. During all the vicissitudes of the exile, the wandering Jews had a strong nostalgia for the temple of the Lord.

The temple was object of devotion: longing, love, joy: “How lovely is your dwelling place, Lord, God of hosts. My soul is longing and yearning for the courts (the temple) of the Lord. The sparrow finds herself a home and the swallow a nest for her brood...” (*Psalms* 84:1-3).

The whole section “The Psalms of Ascents” (120-132) develops the spirituality of pilgrimage, the various sentiments, worries and joys of the pilgrims going up to the temple of Jerusalem. “I was glad when they said to me: ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord!’ Our feet are now standing within your gates, o Jerusalem!” (*Psalms* 122:1-2).

### ***Jesus’ Body and the Worship of the New Testament***

The passion and resurrection of Jesus is the true sacrifice of the New Testament. The sacrifices of animals are declared obsolete, finished and Jesus appears as the High Priest of the New Testament, making the offering of his body once and for all.

Jesus, facing death as an act of supreme obedience and filial love, becomes the true temple that is destroyed by men’s evil power but raised to a new life by the Father. Jesus’ priesthood is not ritual but personal. Jesus is the mediator of the New Testament, bridging the infinite gap between God and humanity with his obedience and sacrificial love.

According to Jesus’ example and command, all Christians are constituted priests because of their baptism, continuing in the world Jesus’ mission through their mediation of love. The Eucharist, which is the memorial of Jesus’ Paschal Sacrifice, is the worship of the New Testament, “the source and the summit of the Church’s life”.

Ultimately, the theological significance of the temple in the New Testament is based on the saying of Jesus which identifies his body as the new temple. His body in turn is identified with the Church, and the Church herself is the new temple. The Church

is the place of God's presence, not merely symbolic but real through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The Apostles and the prophets are the foundation of the temple and Christ is its corner stone and principle of unity. The Christians are the living stones of this temple and its consecrated priesthood.

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**10**

## EVIL IN THE BIBLE

*Evil in the Bible is represented by violence and immorality. Sometimes evil is described and condemned. Sometimes it is simply described but not approved. No problem in that. But there is something more.*

The Bible is God's book, it is about goodness, God's infinite goodness and the goodness of people who follow God's law. In the Bible even kings can be condemned by the prophets because of their evil deeds: famous episodes are king David's sins of adultery and murder (2 *Samuel* 11-12) and Naboth's vineyard (1 *Kings* 21).

The problem arises when evil like violence seems to be ordered by God like in the “Ban”(Joshua 6:17-19). The ancient warfare was very cruel. This cruelty is represented especially by the “Ban (*herem*)” by which persons: men, women and children, and all objects were devoted to the deity for destruction in the context of the capture of a city. The ban is mentioned only in the period of the conquest. Such episodes are present in the books of Joshua and the first book of Samuel.

It is a survival from more primitive and barbarous times. These mass murders of hostile people cannot be justified morally in any way by the fact that the Hebrews believed that the action was pleasing to God, even ordered by God. The conception of Yahweh as a warrior was an imperfect apprehension of his reality and activity.

## ***The Messianic Dream***

There is, however, a development and a growth in the moral and religious mentality of the Old Testament. In it we find elements which permit man to emancipate from the idea of war which is “primitive” in ancient as well as in modern times.

Several passages of the prophets declare the futility of the war as a means of assuring peace and security. It is not the means of salvation for the people of Israel: their survival is assured by faith. Especially the messianic dream of the prophets is a world without war, bound by universal peace and tolerance (“They will hammer their swords into plowshares”: *Isaiah* 2:1-5).

In the New Testament, Jesus says that whoever lives by the sword will die by the sword (*Matthew* 26:52). Jesus especially teaches not to resist evil and to love our enemies. Jesus’ total non-violence is present in the Church in some categories of his followers like the religious and espoused by some (*pacifists*); but the catholic tradition has always accepted reasonable violence in the defense against unjust aggressor.

## ***The conquest of the Holy Land***

A compound problem is the conquest of Canaan. When Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were leaders of large families and nomadic clans they used to wander through the land of Canaan, looking for pasture and water for their flocks. The land did not belong to them but to several other peoples. Abraham only bought the tiny property at Mambre (Hebron) to be his burial ground (*Genesis* 23)

But the Israelites multiplied and became a people during the slavery in Egypt, and when they emerged from the desert, they felt that they deserved their own land. The Bible presents the conquest of Canaan as the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham and a gift from God. This fact must be understood only as a provisional step in the history of salvation.

In the New Testament, the new Israel of God is made up of all the peoples of the earth who believe in Jesus Christ. For the Christian people the “promised land” is Heaven (“*Our homeland is in Heaven*”: *Philippians* 3:20). It cannot be said nowadays that the Bible states that Palestine must belongs to the Jews.

## ***The Polygamy of the Patriarchs***

As for immorality, the main problem is the polygamy of the patriarchs and kings. In the Bible, the purpose of marriage is mentioned in the two accounts of the origin of man with some differences. In *Genesis* 1:27-28, the differentiation of sexes has as its purpose that man should multiply.

In *Genesis* 2:18-25, marriage is the union in which the wife is to be the helper of the man, for “it not good for a man to be alone”. It is implied that the union of man and woman is monogamous. Sex and marriage are divine institutions through which man finds fulfillment. In *Tobit* 8:5-7, Tobias doesn’t take Sarah in lust, but in obedience to God.

The Bible describes polygamy as part of the degeneration of mankind as in *Genesis* 4:23-24 (Lamech's savage song). In the Wisdom books, monogamy is proposed as the ideal state. There appears to have been little or no polygamy after the exile. There is no polygamy in today's Judaism. The highest tribute which is paid to marriage in the Old Testament is the adoption of marriage as an image of the covenant union and love of Yahweh for the people of Israel.

In the New Testament, the teaching of Jesus about marriage is limited to its indissolubility. In this way, Jesus brings back marriage to its original condition and abolishes divorce. Other passages, especially *Ephesians* 5:21-33, continue the parallelism between husband and wife and God and the people, in this case: Christ and the Church. This is why the Catholic Church makes marriage one of the seven sacraments.

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## 11

## THE EMERGENCE OF THE HEREAFTER

*The belief in a life after death is not present in much of the Old Testament. Eventually, the celebration of the joy of being alive continues in the faith of the resurrection of the body.*

In the book of Isaiah, the good king Hezekiah was sick with a festering wound and in danger of death. He prayed fervently to God and was healed. He was so happy that he composed a beautiful hymn. With striking images he describes his sickness and the danger of death and then writes:

“For you have preserved my life from the pit of nothingness, you have thrust all my sins behind you. For Sheol cannot praise you, nor Death celebrate you; those who go down to the pit can hope no longer in your love. The living, the living are the ones who praise you as I do today, fathers tell their sons of your love”.

In the Old Testament, the idea of a life after death, where goodness is rewarded by God and wickedness is punished, appears only gradually together with the resurrection of the body. In the beginning, the reward of faithfulness to God and his commandments is expected in this life. Numberless Psalms, like Hezekiah’s poem, express the dread for the grave and the joy of being spared the darkness of Sheol.

“Sheol” is a word of unknown origin, meaning the “underworld” which the dead “go down to” and where the virtuous and the wicked lead a colorless existence. God is not praised there although the dead are not outside God’s power. Eventually, “Sheol”, the pit, is synonymous of the grave.

Then, little by little, the conscience of a life after death emerges as we can see from some relevant passages and it prepares the full blossoming of this doctrine and conviction in the New Testament.

### ***Anticipations and Clear Affirmations***

The doctrine of a reward and punishment beyond the grave and of bodily resurrection is anticipated somehow by some passages of the Psalms and other books, but doesn’t make a definite appearance until the Old Testament is drawing to a close.

Clear affirmations of the immortality of the soul and of the resurrection of the body appear in the context of the persecution and the experience of martyrdom like the courageous statement of the second of the seven brothers in 2 *Maccabees* 7:9: “With his last breath he exclaimed, ‘Inhuman fiend, you may discharge us from this present life, but the King of the world will raise us up, since it is for his laws that we die, to live again forever”.

The most famous is in *Wisdom* 3:1-5 “But the souls of the virtuous are in the hands of God, no torment shall ever touch them. In the eyes of the unwise, they did appear to die, their going looked like a disaster, their leaving us, like annihilation; but they are in peace”.

### ***The Risen Jesus enters Heaven***

In the New Testament, the fact of the Incarnation brings a new perspective: the Son of God comes into the world to share our life so that we may be able to enter God’s life, the Trinitarian family, life after death. The Resurrection of Jesus is the foundation of

So strong is the faith in the life to come, that the first Christians felt that they did not belong to the world: “For us, our homeland (citizenship) is in Heaven, and from heaven comes the Savior we are waiting for, the Lord Jesus Christ, and he will transfigure these wretched bodies of ours into copies of his glorious body” (*Philippians* 3:20-21). The Risen Christ is the first fruit of a saved humanity. He is our eternal point of arrival.

A very beautiful document of the position of the Christians in the world is the *Letter to Diognetus*, a text of the second generation of Christians, very relevant even today: “The difference between Christians and the rest of mankind is not a matter of nationality, or language, or customs. Christians do not live apart in separate cities of their own, speak any special dialect, nor practice any eccentric way of life... Nevertheless, the organization of their community does exhibit some features that are remarkable, and even surprising. For instance, though they are residents at home in their own countries, their behavior there is more like that of transients; they take their full part as citizens, but they also submit to anything and everything as if they were aliens. For them any foreign country is a motherland, and any motherland is a foreign country. Though destiny has placed them here in the flesh, they do not live after the flesh; their days are passed on the earth, but their citizen is above in the heavens”.

30







