



CATHOLIC SCRIPTURE STUDY

Catholic Scripture Study Notes written by Sister Marie Therese, are provided for the personal use of students during their active participation and must not be loaned or given to others.

SERIES I

THE GOSPEL OF LUKE AND THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

Lesson 1 Commentary Bible

Lesson 2 Questions Gospel of Luke

INTRODUCTION TO THE BIBLE

I. IMPORTANCE OF GOD'S WORD

Our opening song said, "Open your ears, O Christian people, open your ears and hear God's word." St. Paul says, "Faith comes by hearing" (Romans 10:17). And he writes to Timothy: "All Scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching the truth, rebuking error, correcting faults, and giving instruction for right living" (2 Timothy 3:16).

II. REVELATION AND THE BIBLE

God revealed Himself by words and acts to His people. This took place in the lives of the Hebrew patriarchs, in the saving events of the Exodus, in the history of Israel, and finally, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. At first, this was told to others, passed down to each generation, and, at one point, put into writing.

God revealed Himself without needing writing, but He had two reasons for willing His revelation to be recorded under His inspiration:

1. The history in which God revealed himself had to be correctly interpreted: Egyptian people

and Hebrew people obviously interpreted events of the Exodus differently—the crossing of the Red Sea did not mean the same to each. Can you give an example from the New Testament of different interpretations of the same event?

2. The Bible is an inspired interpretation of God's deeds and self-revelation. This was done in spoken words, as Moses, the prophets, and Jesus did; but oral interpretation needed to be preserved for future generations, so God inspired some writers to put it down to provide a record of revelation.

III. INSPIRATION IN THE BIBLE

Father Eugene Maly, Biblical scholar, says: "By inspiration is meant that the Spirit of God was at work in the community of Israel and in the early Christian community, to produce, through a number of human authors, a series of books that witness to God's revelation of Himself through history. This self-revelation was completed through Jesus Christ in the New Testament" (Foreword to the *Good News Bible*).

How did inspiration work? We can never fully understand it, yet the Church, though respecting

the mystery of it, has discarded certain explanations and has said what it is not.

1. It is not “divine dictation” with word-for-word help, or by visions, or as in a tape recorder. This theory implies that God does not honor the freedom of His creatures, and this also does not account for the obvious differences in the biblical writings.

2. It is not “Negative help” where human authors were alone responsible except when they were in danger of religious error and God intervened in some way. This would make the Bible a religious text book which answers particular problems and makes the divine influence present only in some instances. On the contrary, the Bible reveals the person and character of God Himself, not just answers.

3. It is not “later approval” after the Bible was completed. If that were so, how could Jeremiah write: “I will forget the Lord and no longer speak in his name; but then your message is like a fire within me. I try my best to hold it in, but can no longer keep it back” (Jeremiah 20:9). And how could 2 Timothy above, be truth?

The Church has not adopted any one theory of how inspiration works, but holds that God is actively present in a unique way when a writer composes. This is a constant tradition of the Church, which also holds that human authors had free use of their talents and human sources of information. John ends his Gospel: “He is the disciple who spoke of these things, the one who also wrote them down; and we know that what he said is true. Now, there are many things that Jesus did. If they were all written down one by one, I suppose that the whole world could not hold the books that would be written” (John 21:24-25). See Luke 1:1-4 also.

Church teaching on this is found in the encyclical *Spiritus Paraclitus* of Pope Benedict XV: “The individual authors of these books worked in

full freedom under the divine inspiration, each of them in accordance with his individual nature and character” (II, I). This was repeated by Pius XII in *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (#33) and in the Vatican II document *Dei Verbum* (#11) where it says the Bible is the Word of God in the words of humans.

Though written over a period of more than a thousand years, by greatly different human authors—from earliest middle eastern peoples, to desert patriarchs, to cultured Greeks of the time after Jesus—the Bible has a remarkable unity. The same truths, ideas, and teaching are repeated in all, by authors who had never read each other.

This unity is achieved by the Spirit of God revealing and inspiring; yet, there are differing pictures of God expressing truths other writers did not see: Isaiah 6:1-4 speaks of God as a holy king on a throne. Jeremiah 1:1-9 sees him as a close guardian who knew him even before his birth. God’s “anger” expressed by Hosea and other prophets, his strict judgment, are true, all of them, but need to be seen as part of a whole to be the whole truth, the reality of God. This means we have to get acquainted with as much of the Bible as we can to know what God is telling us about Himself.

IV. SACRED SCRIPTURE AND SACRED TRADITION

The inspired books of the Bible closed in some way God’s self-revelation. “In some way” means that God also continues to reveal Himself, though not in the same form as Biblical books. How do we, for instance, know the list of inspired books when the Bible does not tell us this? We know it from the authority within the Church in the Old and New Testament times. The Church existed before the books. The Church decided on the list of inspired books.

Around 400 A.D. the Church collected all the Christian writings claiming to be from apostolic teaching, called the bishops together and decided

on the true and inspired four Gospels and other New Testament writings; added the Old Testament books in use in Our Lord's time among all Jews, and thus gave Christians the Bible as we have it in the Catholic Church today, and printed for the first time by John Gutenberg in 1495. The King James version used by many today is not the same as this first printed Bible.

Luther thought he was more authentic by following a list of Old Testament books drawn up by Jewish Pharisees in 90 A.D., which omitted six books written in Greek but always accepted by all Jews. This is why the Protestant Bible has differed from the Catholic and traditional Bible. Today, however, new evidence from new discoveries causes these books to be accepted more and more. They are now included in Protestant Bibles as apocrypha ("possibly inspired"). The Catholic Church has always accepted them. This 400 A.D. list was called the "canon" (Greek for list or rule) of Scripture, and was formally confirmed by the Council of Trent in 1546.

Sacred Tradition includes the authoritative teaching of Councils—meetings of bishops in union with and accepted by the Pope, the successor of Peter; and the teaching of the magisterium (Latin for teacher)—the ordinary teaching of Pope and bishops. It also includes doctrine from the lives of the people such as those rich in spiritual gifts and accepted as such by the Church—the Saints. The whole people of God, "the faithful," are guided by the Holy Spirit and recognize true doctrines and pass it down. This is called "Sensus fidei" (the sense of the faithful).

Tradition then, includes a long rich period when the Holy Spirit, as John says quoting Jesus, "teaches you all truth."

God thus applied the scriptures' revelation and teaching to specific times and different conditions, providing clearer insights to what He had revealed. Thus the Bible and Tradition go hand in hand—they are not two distinct sources of revela-

tion. As Vatican II has put it: "Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the Word of God which is committed to the Church" (*Dei Verbum*, #10).

V. INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE

We must approach the Bible in faith as from God, and, since human knowledge was involved, we must make use of all possible human sciences to understand the meaning intended by the human authors. This is an immense task and many Christians have spent their lives doing this for the Church.

"The task of authentically interpreting the Word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching offices of the Church, whose authority exists in the name of Jesus Christ... in teaching only what has been handed on..., drawing from this depository of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed" (*Dei Verbum* XII).

A. Translating the Bible. Seventy scholars in Alexandria, Egypt, about 200 years before Christ, translated the entire Jewish Scriptures (the Old Testament) into Greek. Because of seventy scholars, this translation is called the Septuagint (70). This was the most common translation used in the Greek and Roman empire, at the time of Christ.

The New Testament was all written in Greek. By 404 A. D., St. Jerome had translated the entire Bible into Latin, for the common language of the people had changed from Greek. For this he learned both Hebrew and Greek. His translation was accepted as authentic by the Church, which regarded it as necessary and important to carefully guard a translation of the sacred books into the common language.

Yet this came almost to a standstill in western Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire and the dissolution of its Latin language into various lan-

guages—mixtures of Latin and the common Germanic tongues of migratory peoples. These did not become standard or written languages for some centuries, and since there were no schools or printed books—only those copied by hand—the Church preached the Gospel, pictured it in stained glass windows and taught the psalms and some texts by memory. This is how the rosary developed—a way to know the major mysteries of Christ and how to ponder them over and over in biblical prayers.

England, separated by land from Europe, and having a late invasion, was slower in this development of language than the continent, but some Bible books were translated early into Saxon and Anglo dialects. By that time misleading teachers came along, translating Scriptures without authorization and without real scholarship, even altering some teaching. The Church reacted by forbidding the copying of such translations or reading them.

One of these was by an English priest, John Wycliff. William Tyndale in England also translated the Bible into English, during the Reformation and without approval by the universal Church. Meanwhile, after Luther began the Reformation, Catholic English scholars translated the entire Bible into English from the accepted Vulgate Bible, and the Church approved it. This was the English Catholic (Douay-Rheims) Bible we used until this generation, when two other approved versions have been done—the Jerusalem Bible and the New American Bible, officially adopted for our public liturgy.

These latest translations have profited from discoveries of ancient documents in the original Semitic and Greek languages, which reveal meanings of words not known before.

B. Biblical Scholarship. When St. Paul described Scripture he remarked that it was useful for teaching and refuting error (2 Timothy 3:16). Recent encyclicals have called for thorough stud-

ies of human sciences which might enlighten our understanding of the original meaning intended by biblical authors.

Studies, such as archeology, for example, have authenticated many Biblical names and places and increased our knowledge of the history and cultures of much of the times of the Bible. We have learned how much their understanding of history differs from our standards, and have learned not to expect from them what we would from a modern historian with so much better ways to find out the past. We have also learned the literary styles and forms that early biblical times used; Hebrew idioms, metaphors, similes, parallelisms and poetic forms, so that we are not so apt to take them literally. If we know the writer is writing poetry, we do not misunderstand when, for instance, he says, as Carl Sandburg did, “The fog comes in on little cat feet.”

Some Christians today believe that the understandings they have for the words of their language as they read the Bible are necessarily correct understandings and the meaning intended by the author. These Christians are called literalists, sometimes fundamentalists. They accept each word literally, as if our words mean the same as the ancient word, or deny that the passage needs the help of interpretation through competent and acceptable Biblical studies.

Literal interpretations can be very misleading and get into much difficulty in explaining obvious contradictions or differences among Biblical authors. Such readers, for example, believe that the creation story means seven days as we mean seven 24-hour days. They are then at a loss to explain the first three “days” before the sun was created, as the account mentions.

A second group of Christians, starting with Luther, claimed that the Bible is “the only rule of the Faith” completely ignoring the four centuries before the Bible that they have in their hand first existed as one book, and ignoring the apostolic preaching, which taught the faith without a book.

It is the Church which has the divine right to interpret the scriptures and guard them from error. It does so by requiring scholars to have the approval of their bishops or the church department which oversees such things as translations; also by requiring that scholars and publishers put footnotes in Catholic Bibles explaining difficult or disputed texts. Actually, the Church has pronounced on very few passages in the Bible, and it has approved many translations in native languages.

C. Pastoral or Personal, Prayerful Reading of the Bible. St. Paul also wrote to Timothy: “Scripture is useful for correcting faults and giving instructions for right living.” This is the kind of use we should make of the Bible. It should form us, correct us, inspire us. As God’s individual word to us, it is invaluable in making us truly Christian. The pastoral epistles, the gospels, the psalms, wisdom books—how important they are! But people also constantly find help in all the Bible, even genealogical lists!

“Indeed, God’s word is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword. It penetrates and divides soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the reflections and thoughts of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).

APPLICATION

Let us remember that the Bible is the word of God, and also that Jesus left us the Church to guard and interpret it. “He put everything in sub-

jection beneath Christ’s feet and appointed him as supreme head to the Church,” said St. Paul in Ephesians 1:22. And Christ said to one of His apostles who had declared that Jesus was the Son of the living God: “Simon, son of Jonah, blessed are you, for flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I say to you, you are Peter (petra—rock) and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell (evil and error) shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven and whatever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:17-20).

Properly interpreting both the Bible and the Church takes an adult Christian conscience, always formed with prudence, requiring on-going education, prayer, and communication with God, each other, and the Church.

Among the faithful who help us with this process are theologians. The earliest Christian language was Greek in which “theo” means “God,” so “theologian” means those who study God, are wise about him. They reflect on the truths of the faith and reason about it. We respect them, but what they conclude is an opinion they form; many differ with others and this is good. But we must remember that their opinions are not the faith, nor are they teachers of the faith—the Bishops and the Popes are. There is a tendency today to count their opinions as necessarily true or the best. It is good to hear both sides, also.

QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 2

The Gospel of Luke

Note: the following questions were not written by Sr. Marie Therese, but have been added for the St. Bartholomew 2005 Study. With the exception of these questions for Lesson 2, all other questions and notes have been written by Sr. Marie Therese.

Day 1 Read and highlight a passage in these notes that especially struck you and share it with the group.

Day 2 How would you explain the meaning of Sacred Tradition to a non-Catholic Christian friend?

Day 3 Read the Introduction to the book of Luke in your Bible.

a. What are key events in salvation history?

b. Share a key event in your own personal salvation or faith story.

Day 4 What do you know about the author of the Gospel according to Luke?

