

Information on Sacred Scripture

by Simon Rafe

Contents

Intro to the Bible	3
The Pentateuch	6
Genesis	7
Exodus	8
Leviticus.....	9
Numbers.....	9
Deuteronomy	10
The Historical Books.....	11
Joshua	12
Judges.....	13
Ruth.....	14
First Samuel.....	14
Second Samuel	15
First Kings	16
Second Kings	17
First Chronicles.....	18
Second Chronicles.....	18
Ezra.....	19
Nehemiah.....	20
Esther	20
The Wisdom Books.....	21
Job	22
Psalms	23
Proverbs	24
ECCLESIASTES	25
Song of Songs	26
Intro to Prophets.....	27
Isaiah	28

Jeremiah.....	29
Lamentations	30
Ezekiel	31
Daniel	32
Hosea	33
Joel	34
Amos	35
Obadiah.....	35
Jonah	36
Micah	37
Nahum.....	38
Habakkuk.....	39
Zephaniah.....	39
Haggai.....	40
Zechariah.....	41
Malachi.....	41
Intro to Deuterocanon	42
Tobit.....	44
Judith.....	44
Wisdom	45
Sirach.....	46
Baruch	47
First Maccabees	47
Second Maccabees.....	48
Intro to the Gospels	49
Matthew.....	50
Mark.....	51
Luke.....	51
John.....	52
Acts.....	53
The Letters of St. Paul	54
Romans	55
First Corinthians	56
Second Corinthians	57

Galatians	58
Ephesians	58
Philippians	59
Colossians.....	60
First Thessalonians	61
Second Thessalonians	62
First Timothy	62
Second Timothy	63
Titus.....	63
Philemon	64
Intro to Catholic Epistles	64
Hebrews	65
James.....	66
First Peter.....	67
Second Peter	67
First John	68
Second John	69
Third John.....	71
Jude	71
Revelation	72

Intro to the Bible

Here are some interesting facts and information to help us understand what the Bible is and how we can approach it most effectively, so we can learn and love The Holy Bible even more.

The Bible is not really a single book – although there is a central narrative, the story of human salvation, it is not told in the way we are used to reading stories. The Bible is really a collection of books, all of them with the same central theme. That theme is the relationship of God to His people, and the gradual revelation of more and more of the truth of God to humanity. When you read the Bible, it may help you to remember you are reading a library of books about God, rather than a single novel.

The Bible contains many different styles of writing. Some of the books are written in very poetic language – and some of the books contain actual poetry! Many books are historical narratives packed with facts and figures, others are collections of wisdom and wise sayings, and others are prophecy. There are also letters, written at specific times to

specific people about specific things. And, of course, there is the unique format of the Gospel – a writing style which was invented by the early Church to tell the story of Jesus Christ.

The Bible is NOT the be all and end all of Christianity! Many Protestant denominations hold to a teaching called Sola Scriptura, Scripture alone. This teaching says everything we need to know about Christianity is contained in the Bible. This is a false teaching, and is very dangerous. The Bible was written AFTER the Church appeared. It was written and assembled BY the Church. And, most importantly, it was NOT written to be a complete catechism of Christian life. The Bible was written NOT to make people into Christians, but to edify people who already were Christians.

People did not become Christians because of the Bible – they became Christians because of teaching and preaching, and they then used the Scriptures to learn more about Christianity. In many cases, the early Christians were the people WRITING the books of the Bible.

The full history of the Bible is a complex subject, although fascinating. Assembled here is some information which will help you understand the origins of the Bible. You might also like to take a look at: “Where Did The Bible Come From?”

How can we divide that library up into sections.

There are MANY different ways to split the books of the Bible up, but perhaps the most useful and most obvious is to start by splitting them into the Old and New Testaments.

There are 73 books in the Bible. 27 of those are in the New Testament, and the remaining 46 are found in the Old Testament. The Old Testament consists of the books of the Bible written BEFORE Christ – before His birth, death and resurrection. The New Testament consists of books written AFTER Christ's birth, death and resurrection.

The Old Testament can be described fairly accurately as the Jewish Scriptures. All of these books would have been known to Jesus and His disciples, and we know they quoted from them and used them when preaching to others. How do we know this? We know it because quotes from them appear in the New Testament.

The books of **the New Testament** were all written by Christians, people who accepted Jesus Christ and believed He was the messiah, the savior, the Son of God and God. These people were members of the Church. Today, we would call them Catholics, although they did not use that name during the first few decades of the Church.

Written BY the Church FOR the Church

It is very important to remember that the Bible, and the New Testament especially, is a CATHOLIC document. It was written BY the Church FOR the Church. We should remember this NOT as a point of pride or arrogance over other Christians, but rather because this explains so much about it. The Bible is inspired and contains nothing but truth – but it is truth which MUST be interpreted by the Church which wrote it in order to be effective. There can be no correct interpretation of the Bible outside of the teachings of the Church.

The two sections of the Bible are called the Old and New Testaments because they each deal with a covenant between God and His people. The Old Testament deals with the Mosaic Covenant given by God to the Jews, and the New Testament deals with the New and Everlasting Covenant made by Jesus Christ in His blood at Calvary.

When we read the Old and New Testaments, we see parallels and connections – I've already mentioned that Jesus and His apostles quote from the Old Testament when they preach and write. We see prophecies fulfilled and events referenced. We should NEVER make the mistake of thinking the Old Testament is invalid or can be discarded – it is the foundation the New Testament is built on.

But, equally, we should never fall into the opposite error – we should not think the Old Testament trumps the New Testament. It doesn't; there is a New and Everlasting Christian covenant which is expressed in the New Testament and taught by the Church.

There are two ways of breaking down the books which make up the Old Testament. There is the Christian way, and the Jewish way. And, as surprising as it may seem, the Jewish way is actually a newer way of doing it; this was an understanding which grew out of Jewish scholarship after the destruction of the Temple and the rejection of Jesus as the Messiah by the Jews.

The Christian way of grouping the Old Testament is to break it down into four major sections; the Pentateuch, the Historical books, the Wisdom books, and the Prophetic books.

“Pentateuch” means “five books” and this section is the first five books of the Bible; Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. These books are called the Torah or Law by the Jews, because they contain the details of the Jewish law. Traditionally, these books are considered to have been written by Moses himself. These books contain the most familiar Old Testament stories – the creation narrative, Cain and Abel, the flood, the escape of the Jews from Egypt and so forth.

There are 16 Historical books. As the name implies, these books describe the history of the Jewish people prior to Christ. Although the Pentateuch contains historical information these books are where we get most of our knowledge of the Jewish people's history. These books are written in a variety of styles and with varying degrees of historical fidelity – some of them are written with a fair degree of dramatic license, although the core of the historical narrative is clear and correct.

There are 7 Wisdom books. These books are not really narrative stories as we understand them. Rather, they are sources of wisdom and understanding, presented in a variety of poetic and proverbial styles. These books include the Psalms, Proverbs, Wisdom and the Song of Songs.

Finally, there are the prophetic books, or the **Prophets**. These books are the life stories and prophecies of the prophets of Israel. Although they contain some narrative and historical structure, the main focus of these books is their prophetic warnings to the Jewish people and their foretelling of the coming of the Messiah. There are 18 books, further divided into 6 Major Prophets and 12 Minor Prophets. The division of minor and major is not based on importance of prophecy, but rather on the length of the book. A major prophet wrote enough to have his own scroll, while the minor prophets were grouped together on a single scroll.

How is the New Testament divided up!

The majority of books in the New Testament are epistles, or letters; of the 27 books in the New Testament, 21 are epistles. The remaining books consist of 4 Gospels, 1 historical book and 1 apocalyptic book.

The historical book is the Acts of the Apostles, also known as Acts. It is written by the same author as the Gospel of Luke, and many people consider it a sequel or continuation of the story. Certainly, it picks up where the Gospel of Luke ends. It tells the history of the early Church, and focuses very strongly on the preaching of Saints Peter and Paul.

The 4 Gospels are historical books also, but they are a special kind of history. They tell the story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – but they are not mere biography. Gospel means “good news” and the focus of the books is NOT the narrative of Jesus's life, but rather the good news of salvation and redemption which comes through the Person of Jesus Christ. If we read the Gospels just as history we will be disappointed and miss the central message. The Gospels

lack many details we would expect in a modern biography, although they are packed with information about Jesus Christ. The Gospels are the only place where we see and hear Jesus' own words and actions, and an understanding of what these historical events mean to us is what's important, not minute biographical details.

Another book which cannot be read simply as a narrative is the single apocalyptic book, **Revelation**. This is a very misunderstood book. Apocalyptic literature is very difficult to fully grasp and understand. It presents spiritual truths in a symbolic way, and often has much in common with the visionary episodes of the Prophetic works in the Old Testament.

The epistles are letters written by Christian leaders to specific congregations, individuals, or even to the Church as a whole – a sort of “open letter”. They can be divided up a number of different ways. Firstly, they can be divided by author – a majority are written by Saint Paul, two by Saint Peter, one by Saint James and so forth. This is often a good way of dividing the letters, as similar themes appear in the work of a single Saint.

A further way of dividing them is by recipient. Saint Paul's letters to Churches are grouped together, and appear in the Bible in descending order of length, NOT organized by their date of composition. Saint Paul's letters to individuals are grouped together, and the remaining letters – often called the Catholic or General Epistles – make up the final group.

When we read the epistles, it is important to remember that they were written at specific times, to specific people, for specific purposes. While there is certainly divine wisdom within them, we must always take care not to over-apply that wisdom. The letters are specific, individual compositions, not necessarily blanket instructions for the whole Church at all times and places. As I said earlier, we must always read the Bible in the light of the Church's teaching.

The Pentateuch

The Pentateuch, or what the Jews call the **Torah**, are the first five books of the Bible, and this is where we get the name Pentateuch, which means **Five Books**. The word Torah is often translated as Law, but a better translation is instruction or doctrine.

The Pentateuch covers the historical period from the creation of the world until just the death of Moses and the handing of leadership of the wandering Israelites over to Joshua. Viewed from a narrative perspective, this is very satisfactory – the Pentateuch tells us about the foundation of the Jewish people and religion before they gained the Promised Land, ownership of which defines the Jews throughout the Old Testament.

The Pentateuch is called **The Books of Moses**, because traditional authorship is ascribed to Moses. There are other views, however, concerning authorship. When considering the various authorship hypotheses, it is important to bear in mind the idea of corporate authorship, as well as the motivations behind those wishing to advance any particular theory. The important aspect of the Bible is not who wrote it, but the fact the Church declares it to be inspired Scripture.

The Torah enjoys a very special place in Jewish worship and ritual. A special scroll containing the Torah occupies a central, richly decorated place in the Jewish synagogue and when the Torah is read aloud at a service the people stand, the scroll is paraded, and so forth.

The reverence for the Jewish Torah and the Christian Gospels have a lot of parallels, which are easily understood when we consider the Torah explains the Jewish covenant given on Sinai to Moses. This is the Old Covenant, after which the Old Testament is named. It is fulfilled in the New and Everlasting Covenant given in Jesus' blood on Calvary, which is described in the Gospels.

As the Jews do not accept the Old Covenant has been fulfilled, and do not believe in Jesus as the Messiah, they give comparable reverence to the Torah as we do the Gospels.

When we read the Pentateuch, it can seem very confusing to us as modern Christians. Firstly, much of the Pentateuch is devoted to Jewish law and ritual, which we have little experience or understanding of. Secondly, many of the episodes can seem violent or just plain strange to our modern sensibilities.

We should first remember that **the Jewish Law was fulfilled in Christ** – one of the themes running through Saint Paul's letters is that we, as gentile Christians, are not bound to obey the Mosaic Laws concerning diet, clothing and so forth, although we must obey the divine laws of God found in the New Covenant. The Jewish ritual Law bound the Jews together as a people, a nation set apart and marked as the Chosen People of God. They were chosen so that out of them the Messiah could come and salvation is brought to the whole world.

The violent portions of the Pentateuch, and indeed any Biblical text, are often a source of confusion. We should remember the prevailing culture of the time was, in many ways, much more violent than ours and that the gradual revelation of the nature of God through the Bible, culminating in the fullness of revelation in the Person of Jesus Christ, is a process of moving towards peaceful nonviolence, rather than an immediate cessation of war. This topic will be discussed more when we deal with the Book of Joshua, which is pretty much the tale of the conquest of the Promised Land.

Genesis

This is the first book of the Bible, and the name is Greek meaning Origin or Beginning. Genesis contains some of the most familiar Old Testament stories, including the creation narrative, Noah and the Flood, and the tale of the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Joseph, up to and including the Jews dwelling in Egypt following the famine in the land of Canaan.

Genesis can be divided into two major sections. The first is chapters 1 through 11, and is often called the **Primeval --- History**. It is also called the **Antediluvian** because it refers to the history before the Great Flood. Antediluvian means before the deluge or before the flood.

The second portion is the **patriarchal narratives**, which consists of the rest of the book. It tells the story of Abraham, who is selected by God to be the seed of His chosen people, Israel.

The historical accuracy of the primeval history has been questioned by many scholars, and there is much debate concerning it, particularly with regard to the creation narrative. There are many good arguments on either side of the debate, but it is important to remember that the Bible is not intended to be a history or science book as we would understand it today. That is NOT to say the creation narrative is necessarily inaccurate or a myth, but rather to say we must read it looking for the truth it contains.

The Bible is a book which contains spiritual truths, and is good for correction, reproof and instruction in righteousness as Saint Paul tells us in 2 Timothy chapter 3 verse 16. When we read Genesis, we should focus on the spiritual truths it tells us, and not try to glean historical certainties from it. The important points in the creation narrative are that God created all things from nothing, that He did so out of love and not out of need and that He ensouled man via a special act of creative love. We must also understand the sin of our first parents as a very real sin, and regard original sin as real and not merely a poetic expression of humanity's weakness.

The second part of Genesis deals with the lives of the **first patriarchs**, and when we read this our focus should be on the special love God showers on humanity. Despite our first rebellion in the Garden of Eden, and the wickedness of the

world in the days of Noah, and even the evil during the time of Abraham, God never abandoned humanity. We see a gradual revelation of God's plan a purpose for humanity with the covenant with Abraham.

God promises to make of Abraham a great nation, to make this nation His chosen people out of whom He will draw His Messiah who will be the salvation of the whole world. When we read Genesis, or the whole of the Pentateuch and Old Testament, we must always keep this understanding of the Jewish identity at the forefront of our mind. The Jewish people were chosen so they could be the means by which salvation – in the person of Jesus Christ – would come to the world. God reveals prophecies and moral truths to them from the time of Abraham onwards, preparing them for the coming of Jesus Christ. When we read the book of Genesis, we see the very beginnings of this preparation, a preparation of the people who would later on become the Jews as they were understood during the life of Christ.

Exodus

Exodus is the second book of the Bible. We are very familiar with the contents of this book, and not just from religious lessons. Movies such as The Ten Commandments and the modern animation The Prince of Egypt have translated these events onto the big screen. In the book of Exodus, the Israelites are in Egypt, having come there to escape famine in the land of Canaan. They are held as slaves by the Pharaoh of Egypt. The Pharaoh is growing fearful of the Israelites' numbers, and so orders all newborn Israelite babies killed, but a young boy is saved by being placed in a basket of reeds, where he is found by the Pharaoh's daughter. The princess raises this child as her own.

This child is Moses. After killing an Egyptian overseer who is mistreating a slave, he flees to the land of Canaan where he encounters God. God tells him to return to Egypt and demand the release of the Israelites. Moses obeys, but Pharaoh refuses and only relents when God unleashes Ten Plagues on the land.

The Israelites flee Egypt – this is the Exodus of the book's title – and cross the Red Sea by a miracle. There, Moses receives a series of revelations which will form the foundation of the Jewish people's beliefs and way of life.

Exodus is, by any stretch of the imagination, an exciting read. It is full of danger, excitement and intrigue. This is why it has been made into so many movies! But, when we read the Bible for edification rather than entertainment, we should focus on the central theme of Exodus, which is Israel's relationship with God. God is constantly intervening in the lives of His chosen people – be it at the burning bush, or with the plagues, or even with the giving of the commandments. In Exodus, we see God being directly involved with His people, shaping them into the Chosen People out of whom He will draw His Messiah.

God seeks to make the Israelites into His people with whom He can dwell. For this reason, so much of the book of Exodus – twelve chapters! - is given over to the description of the tabernacle where God would dwell. The presence of God in a specific place was of huge importance to the Israelites, and we should meditate on this. As Catholics, we have Jesus Christ in the flesh present in our tabernacles, and reading Exodus can help us have a greater appreciation for this.

In addition, we should pay close attention to the parallels between the life of Moses and the life of Jesus Christ. Jesus can be viewed as the New Moses, and Moses is a type of Christ. The study of typology is complex and interesting. Christ is saved from a slaughter of children by an oppressive king, for example. Most importantly, however, the parallels between the first Passover which saves the Israelites from the tenth plague of the Destroyer and the Eucharist cannot be underestimated. Read Exodus armed with this understanding and come to appreciate the Mass and the Eucharist even more.

Leviticus

Leviticus is the third book of the Bible and the Pentateuch. This is one of the most difficult books of the Bible for a Christian to really engage with. The vast majority of the book of Leviticus is concerned with the so-called Levitical laws, the laws and customs governing the people Israel. It is in this book that we find the dietary laws, prohibitions against sexual deviancy, and so forth.

The book is named after the Levites, the tribe descended from Levi the son of Israel. This is perhaps a misnomer, because the book is mostly concerned with the Aaronic priesthood, not the tribe of Levites as a whole. Aaron the Levite was the brother of Moses, and the priesthood of Israel descended from him.

The book can be divided into two major sections.

Priestly Code which details religious worship rituals and the notion of ritual cleanliness and uncleanness; and the **Holiness Code** which places particular emphasis on holiness and the sacred, encouraging the people to be pure and holy before God.

Much of Leviticus is all-but incomprehensible to a Christian, because it deals with the ritual laws of a covenant fulfilled in Jesus Christ which Christians are not bound to keep. When we read Leviticus, we should bear in mind we are reading the customs and rituals of the Chosen People of God, given to them so they could be the people out of whom God would bring His Messiah. This Messiah has already come for us and is present to us in the Eucharist and His Church, and so we should not see the Levitical laws as a currently binding set of instructions.

Of course, the Levitical Laws are fulfilled in the precepts of the New Covenant, so many of the prohibitions found in Leviticus are also found in the moral teachings of Jesus Christ. What we should be very careful about as Christians is cherry-picking verses from Leviticus. The book must be taken and understood as a whole, as the laws of the Jewish people given to them by God.

We should not, as Catholic Christians, rely on Leviticus to support arguments condemning homosexual behavior for example. In the first place, this falls into the trap of accepting sola scriptura as true – which it is not. Secondly, unless we are keeping all of the Levitical laws, using the text to condemn homosexuality might be considered hypocritical.

Similarly, of course, those who are anti-Christian will choose to select Levitical verses out of context and use them to demonstrate the supposed cruelty and barbarism of Christianity. A correct understanding of the moral teaching of the Church, and where the moral teaching comes from, is essential for the Christian apologist. Cherry-picking verses is not the way to go! A study of our apologetics series will help you better understand this.

Numbers

The book of Numbers is the fourth book of the Bible and the Pentateuch. The book of Numbers is so called because of the numbering of the men of Israel in two censuses taken at the beginning and end of their wandering in the desert. This is the Christian name for the book, taken from the Greek Septuagint translation.

The Jews call the book Bəmidbar, which means in the desert. This is a very good name for the book, because it deals with the wanderings of the Jews in the desert.

The narrative of the book is mostly focused on the historical events which occurred following the Exodus from Egypt, with particular attention given to the faithlessness of the Jewish people and the resulting anger from God.

Reading the book of Numbers, you will learn much about the organization of the people of Israel into tribes, and also see a people who are stubborn and move against God. The incident with the Golden Calf is recounted in Exodus, but there are further examples of rebellion and falling into God's disfavor in Numbers.

The Jews wander for 40 years in the wilderness because God punishes them for a lack of faith; He promised them they would be able to capture the land of Canaan from its inhabitants, but ten of the twelve spies sent by Moses to scout the land brought back a false report, exaggerating the difficulty. For this lie, God punished the Jews with 40 years of wandering.

Not even Moses is safe from punishment for a lack of faith and defiance – when told to speak to a rock to cause water to come forth, he instead strikes it. It is for this reason; Moses is told he will not enter the Promised Land. It will be down to his successor, Joshua, one of the two faithful spies, to lead the people into the Promised Land.

The central theme Catholics should take from the book of Numbers is the need to be faithful to God and trust in His promises; God promised He would not abandon His people and promised they would inherit the land, but the people did not believe Him fully and suffered because of it. While we might not suffer from a LITERAL wandering in the desert, there is certainly a spiritual wandering and lack of direction associated with not trusting in God.

Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy is the last of the books of the Pentateuch and the fifth book of the Bible. **Deuteronomy means Second Law** in Greek. The book is so-named because it consists of a series of sermons given by Moses to the Israelites on the plains of Moab, shortly before they enter the Promised Land, restating and renewing the covenant between God and His people. Much of the book of Deuteronomy is a repetition or restating of events and concepts previously covered in the Pentateuch.

Deuteronomy is a densely packed book, full of interesting and complex information. However, one of the most prominent central themes is the idea of the sovereignty of God over history, and His favor being bestowed on the Jews as a result of their faithfulness to his covenant. This is a theme which is carried over into the book of the **Deuteronomistic history, namely Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings**. The events of the world are explained by reference to the Jew's faithfulness to the covenant with God, and their ownership of the land is something which is conditional on their obedience and faith.

This concept of the ownership of the Promised Land is central to the identity of the Jewish people, and is a recurring theme throughout the Bible, but particularly in the Pentateuch – because this covers the period shortly before they conquer the Promised Land under Joshua. This understanding, of the importance of the land promised by God to the Jews, is essential for any reading of the Old Testament. When you read Deuteronomy, always keep this in mind.

The book of Deuteronomy ends with the death of Moses and the declaration of Joshua as the new leader of the Israelites, which provides a fitting conclusion to the Pentateuch. These five books have described the history of God's Chosen People prior to their entry into the Promised Land, and from then on the Old Testament is focused on a people who are in possession of the land or exiled from it.

The Historical Books

The historical books are part of the Old Testament, the Scriptures the Church received from the Jews before the Incarnation, life, death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. As the name implies, they describe historical events which impacted the Jewish people.

These books are not always known by this name, and are not always gathered together or viewed as a set, but it can be helpful to look at these books as a group in order to understand how they differ from the rest of the Bible.

Of course, the vast majority of the books of the Bible describe historical events, so how are these books different? Well, these books are almost exclusively history, while other books use the historical narratives to frame important spiritual truths. That isn't to say these historical books don't have spiritual lessons to impart – far from it! - But rather that their main focus is the retelling of history, usually for a particular purpose.

When we read the historical books, we need to remember a number of very important things. Firstly, is simply a set of stories we tell about what has happened. The goal of the ideal historian is to tell the absolute, perfect, objective truth – but that is not always possible. Sometimes we don't have all the facts, and so the historian has to take a guess.

In some cases, people are writing history colored by their own views and prejudices – sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously. People write based on what they believe and what they have been told, and this can change how we might tell a story.

Finally, some history is written for a particular purpose – to educate people about a particular aspect of the past. Histories like this are sometimes incomplete – a military history might not mention social or economic history, for example – and sometimes might even exaggerate or minimize aspects of what happened.

All of this is important to know when we read the historical books, as there are what we – with our modern understanding and ideas of history – might call historical errors in here. It is very important to remember that the purpose of the Bible is NOT to give us a perfectly accurate, completely objective retelling of history, but rather to provide us with sacred scripture – words which contain the profound spiritual truths about the world.

It is also the case the Bible is not unique in this regard – the vast majority of historical texts from the Biblical period diverge from the objective, perfect historical truth – because they are written for a particular purpose by fallible historians who are ignorant of some facts or prejudiced by their environment. This was the standard practice for the time and so we must be careful we don't judge the Bible by modern standards – if we do, we will completely miss its purpose.

Having said all that – the historical books of the Bible are, as surprising as it might seem to arch secularists hell-bent on destroying Christianity, very historically accurate indeed. Archeology continues to reveal new findings which support the historical record in the Bible, and the books of the Bible are considered by many historians to be the best historical record we have of this period in the history of the middle east.

The six books of the so-called Deuteronomic History. These books – Joshua, Judges, first and second Samuel and first and second Kings – are considered by many scholars to have been written by the same author, or at least edited into their final form by one person. The themes and style of the books are very similar to those found in the Book of Deuteronomy, hence the name Deuteronomic History!

These six books together form one great history, telling the story of Israel from the conquest of the Promised Land until the Babylonian exile – the period of Jewish history when the Jews were held captive in the city of Babylon following the

sack and burning of Jerusalem in 587 BC. The overarching theme of the history is fidelity to God – those who are true to Him are prosperous and successful, while those who reject Him are punished and deserted.

Throughout the 600 years these books cover Israel abandons the covenant repeatedly and needs to be drawn back into relationship with God. The moral point is made clear by the selection of material included, and by the emphasis given to particular parts. And, the author is not above a little editorial comment to make his point very clear indeed!

A word about the most popular theory of authorship – it is related to the Documentary Hypothesis, which many scholars reject and which does have a number of problems. The Deuteronomic history is considered by many scholars to have been assembled from disparate and varied sources, including folk legends, by an editor – or redactor – who gave it narrative shape and meaning. The editor selected material and arranged it in such a way as to make the moral point he wanted to make – namely, that faithfulness to God is a good and necessary thing!

As mentioned last time, we should not judge the historical books – and particularly the Deuteronomic history – by modern standards or what we expect. The purpose of the Deuteronomic history is clear – to show the spiritual truth that obedience to God leads to prosperity. Of course, we know this is not the full truth – we are not assured of prosperity and success if we are faithful servants of God. If you doubt this, take a look at the book of Job! The important lesson is that – whether spiritually or physically – we benefit if we are faithful to God, and the Deuteronomic history chooses to make that point via a particular telling of history.

Joshua

The book of Joshua is the first of the books of the Deuteronomic history. This is a most interesting book, dealing with a pivotal period in Jewish history and making its theological point repeatedly and clearly.

The book begins where Deuteronomy left off, with the death of Moses and the naming of Joshua as his successor, and it ends with the death of Joshua. This, of course, shows very clearly why the book is called Joshua – it is about him! This is a common practice for Old Testament historical books; they are named after a principal character in their narrative, while New Testament books and prophetic books of the Old Testament are named after their author.

There are a number of very interesting things to note about Joshua, and when you read the book bear these in mind. Firstly, the author makes a very deliberate choice to present Joshua as the new Moses, with events in his life paralleling those of Moses. The crossing of the Jordan parallels crossing the Red Sea, the celebration of the Passover close to these events, Joshua interceding for the people before an angry God, and Joshua giving a farewell address to the Israelites before his death just like Moses did.

The central spiritual theme of the book is fidelity to God – the Israelites are shown as being successful and victorious when they are faithful to God, but when they abandon Him so He abandons them. In a particular example the Israelites are defeated by an inferior, weak enemy and it is revealed by God the defeat is down to some of the Israelites having stolen spoils from the sack of Jericho, which should have gone to the temple. This theme of faithfulness to God is a consistent message throughout the Deuteronomic history.

Another very interesting element of the book of Joshua is the large number of etiological narratives, or stories explaining how things came to be. There are more of this kind of story in Joshua than any other book of the Bible, and explain known geographical features and customs, often by explaining how such a thing happened and concluding with “and it is like this to this day”. Some of the etiological narratives explain how non-Israelite people who nevertheless worshiped

the true God were part of the community – this was important to the Israelites, because of the various commands from God to destroy all non-Israelites living in the land.

The violence and the constant instructions by God for war and destruction also deserve a mention. God does demand destruction of His enemies, and it can be difficult for modern readers to understand it, especially for Christians who have the full revelation of God in Jesus Christ, who seems far more peaceful than God the Father in certain portions of the Old Testament.

Firstly, we should take care we are not selectively choosing violent and destructive actions by God the Father versus kind and compassionate actions by Jesus Christ. There are many examples of compassion and mercy from God the Father in the Old Testament and many examples of harsh and even violent behavior from Jesus Christ. Certainly, Jesus never commands war, but He does drive people of the temple and will sit in judgment over the nations, casting many people into Hell. We should be careful we are not taking a liberal view of Jesus Christ as some milksop, tolerant, ultra-pacifist.

One interpretation for God's commands to make war and destroy nations is because of the great wickedness of those nations – although no specific details are given, Deuteronomy chapter 9: 4 says it is because of the wickedness of those nations. Practices such as child sacrifice have been mentioned as possibilities. God is punishing not innocent people, but violent and evil nations of people engaged in heinous acts.

In addition, the idea of progressive revelation is held by many scholars. God does not reveal Himself and His commands all at once – if He did, there would have been no Moses or Abraham; Jesus Christ Himself would have come to Adam and Eve the moment they left the garden! Instead, God reveals Himself gradually, showing more and more of Himself and His plans for humanity, culminating in His final revelation in the person of Jesus Christ and the Church.

God gradually brings people towards Christian pacifism and perfect love, beginning by tempering the warlike desires of a violent people. An interesting note is that the book of Joshua shows a people who make war, but are not permitted to take plunder for themselves. The spoils of war are for God, for the Temple, and so war has become something undertaken not for personal profit, but rather for specific purposes controlled by God.

Judges

The book of Judges is the second book in the Deuteronomistic history. As the name suggests, it concerns itself with the period of Jewish history when the Israelites were ruled by the Judges, a period of about 200 years between the conquest of the Promised Land and the establishment of the monarchy.

The central figures of the interconnected narratives in this book are the Judges, and a word should be said about them. Although “Judge” is the best translation for the Hebrew word, the office is not so much an interpreter and arbiter of the law, but rather a leader in peace or war over a group of Israelites – sometimes large, sometimes smaller or limited geographically. The Judges were unelected non hereditary leaders of the Jews, and behaved in a variety of ways. Each of them was chosen by God to lead His people through this period in their history.

At the beginning of the book, it is clear the Jewish people aren't in a position of strength and are struggling against the established powers of the region because they are fragmented and disunited. The Judges are sent by God, chosen by Him to lead His people in war or peace. They are charismatic figures, drawing their strength and power from God. Their stories form the central portion of the narrative, and a pattern emerges as we read them.

There is a fourfold cycle; Infidelity to God leads to Punishment until Israel Repents and turns back to Him, at which point He sends a leader to them who Delivers them. The spiritual lesson we should concentrate on is this constant failure and

return, the request for mercy which God always answers. In the Israelites' case, they were delivered by the appearance of a new Judge, but in our – personal – case we are delivered by the final revelation of God, Jesus Christ. When we sin, we suffer and when we repent Jesus Christ comes and delivers us of our sin, through the sacraments of the Church. In many ways, the Judges can be seen as precursors of the Messiah.

The Judges are all very different despite this central theme, and their stories are very entertaining but each with strong spiritual messages to teach us. Read through them, learning about the exciting and colorful characters populating Jewish history, drawing what spiritual lessons you can from them.

Ruth

The story Ruth tells is fairly simple – a famine forces a Jewish family from Bethlehem to emigrate to the land of Moab, and there the sons marry local girls, including Ruth the heroine. The sons then die and the matriarch of the family returns to Bethlehem, but Ruth stays with her, expressing tender and loving loyalty in a well-known passage of scripture;

“Entreat me not to leave you, or to turn back from following you; for wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried. The Lord do so to me, and more also, if anything but death parts you and me.”

The story of Ruth is one of sacrifice, of love expressed in a particular way – through loyalty to one person. This is the main theme of the work and should be our spiritual focus when we read it as Catholics, although it is likely this is not the main purpose of the work.

Opinion is divided on why the Book of Ruth was written, but the book does explain how and why Ruth becomes an ancestress of David and – through him – the Messiah Jesus Christ. Ruth is a Moabite, and in Deuteronomy 23:3 that race of people is specifically forbidden from entering the Assembly of God. The reason given is a lack of hospitality, and when we see Ruth's love and charity overcoming this prohibition we are reminded of the acceptance of the Gentiles into the Church founded by her descendant, Jesus Christ.

With their emphasis on purity and adherence to the Law, it was important for the Jews to understand why and how King David had a Moabite ancestor, although the importance of this may be lost on modern Catholics.

Ruth is a very short book, so do take the time to read it and understand the historical context of the work and its importance in the lineage of David and Jesus.

First Samuel

First and Second Samuel, as the names imply, are part of the same narrative – in the Hebrew Scriptures they are presented as a single book, not two – and Samuel is a major character in the books.

A word should be said about the division of the books of Samuel and the books of Kings in our modern Bibles; when the scribes of Alexandria translated the Hebrew Scriptures into the Greek Septuagint they divided the text of Samuel and Kings into four books, which they called the Books of the Kingdoms. In the Latin Vulgate, these became the Books of the Kings, with First and Second Kings being what modern Bibles call First and Second Samuel, and Third and Fourth Kings being what we know as First and Second Kings.

Regardless of what we call the books of Samuel, they tell the story of a tumultuous period in Jewish history. They begin by talking about the birth of Samuel. Hannah is childless, and she promises God she will dedicate her son, if she has one,

to Him. God grants her a son, and she keeps her promise, calling him Samuel. Samuel is the last of the Judges and the first of the Major Prophets, and so he straddles two eras of Jewish history – both as the last of one group and the first of another, but also as someone who ruled as a Judge and established the next form of Jewish government, the monarchy.

Samuel leads the Jewish people, but when he appoints his sons as Judges in his old age they do not follow his example, and the people clamor for a King, like the other nations. God reluctantly agrees to this and leads Samuel to find and anoint Saul of the tribe of Benjamin, a tall and handsome man. He becomes king and leads the Jewish people in a series of military campaigns against their enemies the Philistines. However, Saul's conduct is displeasing to God and He instructs Samuel to find a replacement.

It is at this point the prototype for all Jewish kings enters the narrative, King David. We first see him a shepherd boy who is skilled at playing the harp, called to the court to sooth the tormented Saul. But David soon proves himself far more than a musician – he becomes a great military champion and leader, defeating Goliath the giant champion of the Philistines and winning many more battles.

David is successful in everything he does, and this earns the enmity of the jealous Saul, who plots to kill him. David flees, hiding from Saul among the Philistines even as the king pursues him.

When Saul consults God for advice he gets no answer – perhaps because of his previous unfaithfulness – and so he chooses to go to the witch of Endor, a necromancer, to consult with Samuel. The witch calls Samuel's spirit, who rebukes Saul for his faithlessness and tells him he is already condemned.

First Samuel ends with the death of Saul, attacked by the Philistines, and this makes an acceptable break in the narrative – although it is important to remember the Hebrews did not have this break in their scriptures, and the story went straight into what we call Second Samuel.

The story in Samuel is very long and complex and there are a number of themes to focus on.

God's reluctance to provide a king for the Jews should be noted – they want to be like the other nations, but God does not want that for them. They think they need a king to lead them militarily, but they do not realize their military defeats are not due to poor leadership, but to faithlessness.

Samuel's sons fail to behave appropriately. Saul is punished because of his refusal to wipe out the Amalekites, and this should be contrasted with the faithfulness of Abraham in Genesis as well as Joshua's willingness to fight God's battles.

The first book of Samuel tells a primarily military history, a war story of conquest and violence, with great leaders such as Saul and David, and mediating on this aspect of salvation history is important. Remember, it is from the house of David that Jesus Christ comes and so it is correct to see Jesus as a victorious king leading His people to victory.

Second Samuel

The second book of Samuel, despite the name, has little to do with Samuel, and is given its name because it follows on from the first book of Samuel, in which the Judge and prophet is a major character. The second book of Samuel picks up where the first book left off – remember, in the Hebrew Scriptures the two books are a single continuous narrative – with the death of King Saul.

The narrative of Second Samuel is well-known and in its general thrust is very simple – David becomes King and rules over Israel during its brief moment as a major power in the Near East. He is by no means perfect – he is very human in

his failings, as his adultery with Bathsheba makes clear, but his love for God is passionate and intimate. He is the model for all Jewish kings, and is this – not the historical narrative of his rule of Israel – which we should concentrate on. The history is very interesting, exciting and educational – but the spiritual lessons we can learn about kingship and the promise of the messiah are most important for us as Catholics.

When David conquers Jerusalem, God makes a promise to him, the Davidic Covenant. He promises he will establish David's house eternally. This is the promise of the Messiah, for although David's line will ultimately fail as earthly rulers of the Jewish people, the title King of the Jews will be given to a man from David's line for all eternity. That man, of course, is Jesus Christ, the Messiah, who is born of the Tribe of Benjamin, of the House and Lineage of David, and in the town of Bethlehem which is where David is from. Jesus Christ is the New David, who will rule as King eternally.

David is a central figure in the history of the Jewish people, but without grasping the connection between him and Jesus we are perpetually looking backwards to a flawed earthly kingship, rather than looking at an eternal, perfect Heavenly Kingdom.

Another very important character in the story is Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, with whom David commits adultery. We can learn a great deal about moral conduct from the shameful story of David's lust and cruel treatment of his captain, and much about repentance and the mercy of God from what happens after.

Read the Second Book of Samuel and immerse yourself in the exciting story of David and his rule over Israel, giving particular spiritual attention to the typology of the New David in Jesus Christ

First Kings

As noted in First Samuel, a word should be said about the division of the books of Samuel and the books of Kings in our modern Bibles; when the scribes of Alexandria translated the Hebrew Scriptures into the Greek Septuagint they divided the text of Samuel and Kings into four books, which they called the Books of the Kingdoms. In the Latin Vulgate, these became the Books of the Kings, with First and Second Kings being what modern Bibles call First and Second Samuel, and Third and Fourth Kings being what we know as First and Second Kings.

The two books of Kings, which – like the books of Samuel – are a single book in the Hebrew Scriptures, make up the final part of the Deuteronomistic history. The theme of the narrative is the gradual decline of the monarchy from David, through his son Solomon, the division of the kingdom following Solomon's death and the final destruction of Jerusalem and deportation to Babylon.

The first book of Kings begins with the rise of Solomon to the kingship through the machinations of his mother and Nathan the prophet, and describes his rule. Solomon, despite losing some territory, rules over a very powerful and noble court, filled with fine art and literature. However, his taking of many concubines and wives – with their alien and false gods – led to him falling into the worship of these gods, and falling out of God's favor.

This is one of the two themes we should concentrate on when we read the first portion of the book of Kings; Solomon is enticed into the worship of false gods by his wives and concubines, even going so far as to construct places for their honor opposite Jerusalem. And, of course, this is Solomon we are talking about – the rich, wealthy, incredibly wise and powerful king who builds the glorious temple to God! The lesson is, I hope, not too obvious – that even those who are powerful and wise, and do great things for God, can fall into evil practices and behaviors. Solomon's infidelity results in God promising He will split the kingdom after his death and part will be given to others.

The other theme is the role of Bathsheba, Solomon's mother, should also be considered. She is the queen mother, the mother of the king, and she is an advocate for her son prior to him being anointed king. The position of Queen Mother was a prominent one in the Davidic court, and Bathsheba is a type of Mary – as discussed last time, Jesus is the New David and His mother is the Queen Mother of the New Davidic kingdom. This theme is one Catholics should definitely meditate on.

But the main historical narrative is the gradual collapse and fall of the kingdom, thanks to Solomon's infidelity to God. First Kings continues after the death of Solomon, describing the splitting of the kingdom into two parts. The later portions of the narrative are concerned with the prophet Elijah, who is a potent figure indeed – he tirelessly defends the worship of God against the more popular worship of Baal, and performs many miracles indeed. This part of the Bible is very “Old Testament” in its style and scope, full of fire from the Heavens and the dead being raised to life again. This is dramatic, but the theme and message we should take from this is the power and majesty of God used in defense of his people and to encourage people to worship and love Him.

Second Kings

The second book of Kings is the final book of the Deuteronomistic history. It picks up where the first book of Kings left off – remember, in the Hebrew scriptures these two books are a single continuous narrative. The break in the narrative between the two parts occurs when Elijah hands the office of prophet over to Elisha, his apprentice, and this is a good break in the narrative.

The books of Kings are typical of the Deuteronomistic history in their emphasis on the fourfold cycle of INFIDELITY, PUNISHMENT, REPENTANCE and DELIVERANCE. The books tell the stories of the Kings of the Chosen People, but they do so from a religious perspective – every king is assessed on his fidelity to God, not on his military or political achievements. Particular emphasis is given to his rejection of or agreement with worship of false gods – this is seen by the author of the Deuteronomistic history as being the greatest of sins a Jewish King can commit.

The story told is one of gradual decline, as the kings continue to allow false worship and materialism, until the northern kingdom was sacked and destroyed by the Assyrians around 721 BC.

The promises given to David – the Davidic Covenant – which stated his house would rule eternally provide some protection for the southern Kingdom of Judah, ruled by his House, but even that kingdom falls when the Babylonians invade and sack Jerusalem around 587 BC. This is the beginning of the infamous Babylonian captivity, and the end of the Davidic kingdom.

In addition to learning this fascinating history, as Catholics we should learn the spiritual lessons of the second book of Kings – fidelity to God is important, and worship of false gods is evil and dangerous. In the first book of Kings, we saw what happened to Solomon when he took up the worship of false gods, despite the good things he did for God. This is a very important lesson; there can be no compromise over the worship of false gods. Catholics today would not be so foolish as to worship Baal or Moloch, but we must be careful to avoid the more subtle temptations of worshipping celebrity, money, power or prestige. Nothing can be allowed to get between us and God.

So, read the second book of Kings, and immerse yourself in the exciting and dramatic history of the fall of the great Kingdoms of the Jews.

First Chronicles

Like many of the paired books in the Bible, these books are a single book in the Jewish texts and their division into two parts in the Christian scriptures comes from the Septuagint.

The books of Chronicles describe the same events as the books of Samuel and Kings; they are a retelling of that already told in the Deuteronomistic history. In places the very same phrases and words are used but in the main this is a simpler retelling of the history, with an emphasis on the liturgy of the Temple.

The first book of Chronicles describes the period up to the end of David's reign, and so roughly covers the same period as the books of Samuel. Of particular interest is the suppression of embarrassing details about David's life – his adultery and the revolts and intrigues of his reign are given very little emphasis.

The reason for this might have something to do with the period of writing – there is much debate about the books' composition, but it is certain they were written after the return from the Babylonian exile, around the 3rd century BC. This was during the time of the Second Temple and was a period when worship there was most important, most wonderful and at the center of Jewish life.

When viewed in this way, the reason for the emphasis on Temple liturgy and the very positive portrayal of the period of the Kings becomes plain. The Davidic period is looked back on as a positive, excellent era when the beautiful liturgy of the Temple was created. In the books of Samuel and Kings, the monarchical period is one of defeat and failure, culminating in the eventual sacking and destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, followed by the dreadful Babylonian captivity.

It can be helpful to read Chronicles alongside Samuel and Kings, to get the rounded picture of this period of Jewish history. Scholars today are divided on which books are more historically accurate, and it is quite likely both have things to teach us.

Second Chronicles

As we already mentioned, Chronicles is a retelling of the history covered in the books of Samuel and Kings, written in the post-exilic period probably around the third century BC. They give great emphasis to the Temple liturgy and depict the monarchical period in a very positive manner, much more so than the books of Samuel and Kings.

This is very apparent in the Second Book of Chronicles, which begins with Solomon son of David and the building of the First Temple. It covers roughly the same period of history as the books of Kings, although very little emphasis is given to Solomon's harem and his worship of foreign gods. As in the books of Kings, subsequent kings are assessed by their fidelity – but not to the Deuteronomistic covenant, but rather to prayer and Temple worship.

This difference of emphasis – towards Temple liturgy and away from the infidelities of the King's reigns – reveals the books of Chronicles to be very different from the books of Samuel and Kings, and you should really read them alongside each other. There are places where parallel structure, and even the same phrases, are used – making the differences all the more stark.

Perhaps the most striking difference is the optimistic conclusion to the books of Chronicles. Second Chronicles ends with Cyrus the Great of Persia releasing the Jews and setting them free, sending them back to Jerusalem. This narrative is continued in the next book of the Christian Scriptures, Ezra – and in fact becomes even more positive as Cyrus orders

his people to give the Jews money and goods to help them – but the positive conclusion has particular implications for modern Jews.

The Jewish Scriptures are most often ordered in a form known as the Tanakh, which ends with a collection of books known as the Ketuvim or the writings. Despite the fact the book of Chronicles deals with events before other books in the Ketuvim, it is placed last in the canon. Thus, the very last words of the scriptures as used by many modern Jews are instructions to return to Jerusalem and build it up.

The importance of the land for the Jewish people cannot be overestimated – it is one of the marks of the Jewish people, something they are promised personally by God and which they fight terrible wars and suffer many hardships to gain. For nearly 19 centuries, the Jews did not have a homeland and it can be difficult for non-Jews to grasp just what this meant to them. When we consider that the last words of the Jewish Scriptures urge returning to Jerusalem, an additional understanding of Jewish and Israeli nationalism is made plain.

Geopolitics aside, the books of Chronicles are an interesting read, allowing us to compare and contrast their liturgical-emphasis with the Deuteronomic history.

Ezra

The book of Ezra is a short book of the Old Testament, dealing with the period following Cyrus the Great's returning the Jews to Jerusalem. The traditional view is that Chronicles, Ezra and the next book, Nehemiah, were all written together by a single person. More modern scholarship, however, has challenged this view – suggesting that the books have been repeatedly edited before their final form emerged around the time of Christ. It is certainly the case the two books Ezra and Nehemiah were combined together into Ezra-Nehemiah and only separated in the early Christian era, around the third century AD.

In some versions of the Bible – notably the Latin Vulgate – the book of Ezra is called First Ezra or First Esdras, with Second Esdras being what is often called Nehemiah. To further complicate matters, there are other non-canonical texts which are named Ezra or Esdras.

The four books first and second Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah share many features. They are concerned with the Temple liturgy, purity and a return to Zion. As non-Jews, it can be difficult for us to appreciate the importance of these themes to the Hebrew people, but we really should try to understand them if we are to benefit from what the inspired authors are trying to tell us.

The book of Ezra can be hard to follow, because it does not follow a chronological order but rather a thematic one; similar episodes are grouped together. In addition, much of it consists of lists and complex decrees and counter-decrees, something which can make our heads spin and our eyes glaze over.

Regardless of the complexity of the book, however, one theme stands out – the positive outcome of the return to Zion, and the great favor enjoyed by the returning Jews. The Kings of Persia offer a great deal of material support and protection to the Jews, and throughout the book God is recognized as not merely the god of the Jews, but the One True God of all the Earth by everyone.

As Catholics, we should read these positive outcomes – even if we might not fully grasp the historical intricacies – and treat them as a spiritual shot in the arm, a palate cleanser. Too often, we are filled with negative and depressing outcomes – but Ezra is uplifting and positive, a tale of success and victory, of support from not only God but also the powerful politicians of the world.

Nehemiah

The book of Nehemiah, not only follows on from the book of Ezra, but is considered by many scholars to be part of the same writing. In some versions of the Bible – such as the Latin Vulgate – the Book of Nehemiah is actually called Second Ezra or Second Esdras, making this connection explicit.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the book deals with the same theme as Ezra – the return to Zion and the restoration of the Jews to Jerusalem. But while Ezra is concerned with the rebuilding of the Temple, Nehemiah is concerned with the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem and the establishment of a functioning government and civil order.

Overseeing this is Nehemiah, the man after whom the book is named and whose first-person memoir forms the majority of the text. He is a Jewish official at the court of the Persian king at Susa, the king's cupbearer. He is assigned as governor of Judah and travels there to rebuild the walls and order.

He does this despite opposition from the surrounding peoples and the corruption of those already in Jerusalem. Nehemiah is shown as being a merciful and just governor, ruling the people fairly and encouraging piety and justice. Although his task of rebuilding walls and government might seem less religious than Ezra's of rebuilding the Temple and liturgy, the frequent exhortations to holiness and repentance show his is just as much a mission from God as Ezra's.

As mentioned before, Ezra and Nehemiah were originally a single work called Ezra-Nehemiah and were separated in the third century AD. When read together, the pattern becomes clear – God inspires a Persian King to commission a Jewish leader to carry out a mission to restore Israel. There are three such missions; the first two – to rebuild the Temple and purify the city – are in Ezra and the final one – to enclose the city behind a wall – is in Nehemiah. When you read these books of the Bible, it is strongly recommended to read them as a whole to better appreciate this aspect of the narrative.

One of the major themes of Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah is the importance of the land, and specifically the city of Jerusalem and the Temple to the Jewish people. In Nehemiah the city of Jerusalem and its various locations – particularly its gates and walls – are described, and we have to imagine how this would be received by Jews living in the city. They would be reading about places they knew and were familiar with, making the stories of their building deeply personal.

Obviously, we cannot have the same experience they did – but with a good map of the ancient city we can gain a greater understanding of what is going on in Nehemiah.

Esther

The book of Esther appears in the Protestant canon, but in a shorter and cut down version, missing portions which only exist in the Greek. The book is – without the Greek portions – absent any explicit reference to God, and it might have been this which caused Martin Luther to hate the book as much as he did – he said he hated it so much he wished it did not exist, and that it contained heathen vice and too much Judaism.

And speaking of antisemitism, that is the main theme of the book. The story is set in the court of a mighty Persian king who takes a beautiful young Jewish girl, Esther, as his queen. The king does not know she is Jewish, and this fact allows his courtier Haman to arrange to have all the Jews killed and their property taken.

The story shows the Jews as living among other people, in small, almost ghettoized communities with a great deal of hatred and fear shown towards them. They are persecuted and in fear of their lives, and ask their Queen to intercede for them with the king. She does so, after asking the entire community to fast.

Using her cunning and beauty, as well as using the greed and arrogance of Haman against him, she manages to completely turn the situation around; not only saving the Jews from death, but making sure Haman gets his comeuppance. In many ways, this story has much in common with Judith – a beautiful, resourceful Jewish woman saves her people through guile and charm rather than strength of arms.

It can be easy for Catholics to disregard this book of the Bible since it is essentially a soap-opera tale of harem and court politics and in some versions does not even speak of God. But that would be a mistake. Firstly, the use of soft power – of persuasion, cunning and cleverness – to overcome violence, brutality and hatred is instructive. Esther is a compassionate, loving queen – she loves her people, and also loves her king. This triumph of love is an important message for all Christians.

In addition, the exhortation to fast is one which we – especially those of us living comfortable, easy lives – would do well to remember. This is a story of religious persecution. Today, the vast majority of religious persecution is done to Christians, but usually in countries far from us. We need to be reminded of the realities of living the Gospel, and reading this story and mediating on what it tells us, can do just that.

The Wisdom Books

The Wisdom Books are an overview of a disparate group of books from the Old Testament. These are seven books of the Old Testament – Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Ecclesiasticus, Wisdom, the Psalms and the Song of Songs. Some of these books have alternate names you might be more familiar with, but we'll cover those in the individual chapters.

The books were written over a very long period of time – many of the Psalms were written by King David, Solomon is the traditional author of several of them, while others are among the last books of the Old Testament written. The unifying factor of these books is the genre of 'wisdom literature', which is something we are perhaps unfamiliar with today.

Wisdom literature was common through the ancient world, and was not confined to a single culture. The Israeli scholars drew heavily on Egyptian and Mesopotamian sources in formulating their literature.

As names like Proverbs and Wisdom suggest, the genre of wisdom literature focused mainly on practical advice for living – what we might call common sense. It was designed to impart the wisdom of the elder generations to youth and – hopefully – to allow the inexperienced to avoid making mistakes because of their ignorance and naiveté.

As anyone who has tried to instruct a hot-headed youth will know, this is often doomed to failure – but older, wiser heads continue to offer the advice and sometimes the young even accept it! We see this today in self-help books, idiots' guides and so forth. Really, wisdom literature was the ancient equivalent of these books, and usually had not specific religious foundation.

However, in Jewish thought it is impossible to get away from the worship of God – the understanding of God as the supreme power in the universe, greater to all other gods, of infinite might is a uniquely Jewish phenomena and sets their wisdom literature apart. The end result is two unique features of Jewish wisdom literature as found in the Old Testament.

The first is a concern with human destiny – in Job and Ecclesiastes we find agonizing over destiny and fate, in Ecclesiasticus this gives way to tranquil confidence and in Wisdom there is an explicit assertion of the soul's immortality. The good advice is not merely practical steps which can be taken to lead to a happy, successful life – but also a blueprint for a joyful and God-centered destiny.

The second unique feature is an understanding of where wisdom comes from – wisdom is personified, and seen as not only the agent of divine activity in the world, but also as participating in the divine nature itself.

Of course, as Christians we can clearly see where these unique teachings are heading – towards the understanding that our virtues and vices have an impact on our eternal destiny, the notion of sin and good works, and towards the revelation of God as not a mere singular person, but as a Trinity of persons in communion. The personification of wisdom as a divine person looks towards Christ, the Logos, the Word of God and God Himself.

Take a few moments to dip into the wisdom books. You can approach them as merely good advice – and if you do this, make sure to apply them to your lives! - Or you can meditate on them as methods of divine revelation on the nature of God and man.

Job

The Book of Job is the first of the wisdom books. Scholars feel this book was composed between four and six hundred years before the birth of Christ, although the theme – of a righteous man suffering – is common to much earlier literature. Like all of the Old Testament Wisdom Books, however, there is an additional layer of understanding due to the authors' relationship with God.

The narrative is simple and well-known; Job is a righteous and holy man, devoted to God. Satan maintains that Job's love for God is merely because God has protected him, his family and possessions from damage and persecution, and asks God if he can test Job's faith by attacking his family, his possessions and ultimately Job himself. God agrees, allowing Job to be tested.

Job is afflicted with many horrible sufferings, but throughout refuses to curse God – despite the encouragement of his wife – and maintains his innocence. His friends encourage him to admit his guilt, assuming – in their theological understanding – that he must be being punished for some sin; they believe good things do not happen to bad people, and bad things do not happen to good people.

Ultimately, God responds – profoundly, emphasizing His sovereignty and majesty, decrying Job's friends' lack of faith and restoring Job to wealth and health.

The story itself is very easy to follow and understand, and I would recommend you read it for yourself. As is common for wisdom books, it is a series of useful pieces of advice, albeit connected by a narrative structure. As Christians, however, there are some particular themes we should focus on.

Firstly, the book is a response to the question of why bad things happen to good people – the narrative and God's response deconstruct and destroy the notion that what happens to us in this life is some kind of karmic payback for good or evil deeds. We have an instinctive notion that good deeds will be rewarded and evil deeds punished, and that the righteous and faithful should not suffer – but Job corrects this misapprehension. This aspect of the book looks forward to the teaching of Christ, that those who love God will be persecuted for His sake, and is a rejection of the false teaching of the Rapture whereby the faithful are snatched away before the tribulation.

As a piece of literature to read when things are not going our way, when we feel God might have abandoned us, Job is unparalleled. It is a rare man who can say his suffering is equal to Job's, and an even rarer man who can say his response is as holy and patient as Job's.

Job maintain his innocence, but never once says what is happening is unfair – he merely wishes to know WHY this is happening, and seeks to speak to God to find an explanation. He recognizes the sovereignty of God over all things, and never once suggests that God is unjust for sending these things to try him. Most importantly from a Christian perspective, however, is Job's recognition that there is a gulf between God and him – God is not man, and Man is not God. In chapter nine he articulates this explicitly, saying there is no arbiter between God and Man.

Of course, as Catholics we can see where this is heading – God becomes Man, in the person of Jesus Christ, and is our arbiter before God-as-Judge. In chapter 16, verse 19 Job begs for a witness, for God to function as an arbiter before God. Again, in chapter 19 verse 25, Job speaks of a 'redeemer'. These passages are clear references to the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

And THIS is the fundamental theme of the book of Job from a Christian perspective; while the advice of patient suffering in adversity is valuable and beneficial, such advice is merely sadism and toleration of cruel caprice if there is no redeemer, no arbiter, no Christ. Job's lament that God is not like us, that God cannot understand, is answered and dismissed in the person of Christ and by His Incarnation.

No longer can anyone say God does not understand suffering, no longer can anyone claim bad things do not happen to good people. The incarnation and the passion put paid to this notion – and the book of Job, with all its poetry and majestic sovereignty of God, points to this in a most beautiful way.

Psalms

The Psalms is the hymn book of the Jewish people. Unlike many other books of the Bible, the Psalms do not have a coherent narrative – each chapter in the book is an individual Psalm, and while there are thematic similarities there is no narrative progression. Each Psalm is a separate hymn or prayer, gathered together into a single collection. Even among the wisdom books, the Psalms stand-alone. They are included in this group of Biblical texts because of their traditional authorship (many are ascribed to King David) and because they really have nowhere else to go.

The word 'Psalm' comes from a Greek word meaning 'music of the lyre' or 'songs sung to a harp' and this reveals their musical nature; these were not simply spoken prayers, but were part of a rich musical tradition of the Jewish people. Remember that King David was famed for his skill with the harp, and frequent reference is made to music in Jewish worship.

The Psalms were written over a long period – some are explicitly by or about King David, while others were clearly composed during the Babylonian Exile as they reference that event. Many Psalms were composed as purely oral, not written. The idea of collecting these hymns and prayers evolved gradually over time. Most scholars feel the current collection of 150 Psalms dates from the period of the Second Temple, the temple standing during Christ's lifetime, and that a book similar to the one we have in our Bibles was the prayer book of the Second Temple.

Like most books of the Old Testament, the Psalms exist in two main formats – the Greek Septuagint version, and the Hebrew texts. As is usual, there are differences but these are minor – for the Psalms, the most significant difference is in the numbering. Psalm 9 in the Greek text is Psalms 9 and 10 in the Hebrew, and Psalm 113 in the Greek is Psalms 114 and 115 in the Hebrew.

The official Bible of the Church – the Latin Vulgate – follows the Greek order, and the Greek numbering is used in the official liturgy of the Church. Generally speaking, Protestants use the Hebrew numbering. Many modern Bibles –

designed for academic study and comparison – have both the Greek and Hebrew numbering. So, when you are discussing the Psalms take care not to get confused over numbering issues!

It is difficult to offer a simple overview of the spiritual lessons of the Psalms – because they are the Prayer book of Israel, and so cover the whole faith life of the Jewish people. There are Psalms of thanksgiving, of praise, of lament – this is a very common theme indeed – and Psalms which look towards the coming of the Messiah. Historically, the Psalms were used in the Temple liturgy, and historical and archaeological research has revealed some of the schedule and order of liturgical use.

As Catholics, we can read the Psalms simply by dipping into them, reading them prayerfully as the Holy Spirit guides us. Or, we can search them out by topic and theme, finding a Psalm which is particularly appropriate for our needs at the time.

But, there is a better way to delve into the Psalms – and that is liturgically. Not only are the Psalms used in the liturgy of the word at Mass, but they form a key component of the liturgy of the hours, especially in morning and evening prayer. The Church, in her wisdom, has created a cycle where some of the most important and significant Psalms are prayed as part of structured regular prayer.

The liturgy of the hours can be found in a multiple-volume set, or in a single book – called Christian Prayer. This single-volume gives you everything you need to regularly pray the liturgy of the hours – a devotion which all Priests and religious undertake daily, and which is strongly recommended for lay persons as well. It can be tricky to work out exactly what prayers one should be praying on a particular day – there is a four-week cycle, as well as the cycle of the liturgical year and the feasts of the saints – but it is very rewarding.

So, rather than recommend you read the whole of the book of the Psalms – which would take a long time, and might work against its nature as a book of prayers – consider starting the liturgy of the hours, particularly morning and evening prayer, and dip into the Psalms either at random or inspired by your particular needs.

Proverbs

The book of Proverbs is a collection of wise sayings and good advice – really, the quintessential piece of wisdom literature. The traditional author is Solomon, the King of Israel, son of David, and a man famed for his wisdom and insight. There are several points in the book where Solomon is explicitly identified as author, although there are additional authors mentioned in the text. Some modern scholars have suggested the book was composed long after Solomon's life.

Of course, it is easy to harmonize these various views – wise men, even one gifted with wisdom by the Divine, often stand on the shoulders of giants and will repeat the wisdom of earlier and different thinkers, bringing them together into a cohesive whole. Similarly, in the oral culture of the ancient Near-East proverbs and other wise sayings would be passed along by word of mouth, being gathered together into a formal written structure only later. Accordingly, it is very likely this book represents the wisdom of King Solomon, together with the thoughts of other wise men, which was gathered together in this format later on.

The good advice in Proverbs is presented in a patriarchal or monarchical manner – the head of a household, of the King of a court, is the one giving the advice to his children or subordinates. This reflects not only the traditional manner good advice is given – from seniors to inferiors – but also the structure of Israel, which was strongly monarchical and family-oriented.

Like all the wisdom books, Proverbs presents common-sense advice which is often not explicitly religious. However, the personification of wisdom is found in this book, and this is a pre-figurement of the incarnation, of Christ as the Wisdom of the Father.

Throughout Proverbs – and elsewhere in the wisdom books – wisdom is personified as female. This should not be understood to suggest that God is female or, even worse, that Christ was somehow incarnated as a woman but 'the Church covered it up' or some such nonsense. Both Greek and Hebrew are gendered languages – like French or German today – and nouns have a gender, while they do not in English. The word for wisdom in both of these languages is feminine, and so when personified it is impossible to write of wisdom as male.

From the Christian perspective, one of the most important parts of Proverbs is chapter 8. In verse 22, a word sometimes rendered as 'created' is better understood as 'possessed', because Wisdom is not created by God. That would imply that there was a time when God did not have Wisdom! In fact, further on in chapter 8 we have seen wisdom participating in the creation of all things, and a distinction drawn between wisdom's relation with God and God's relationship with the created universe.

It is not hard to see the clear teaching in this Old Testament book; that wisdom – that is Christ, the logos, the wisdom of the Father – is not created, but begotten of the Father, and that through Him all things are made. So, take some time to read Proverbs – and put the good advice to good use! But also meditate on the subtle revelation of the incarnation and the internal relationship within the Trinity.

ECCLESIASTES

Ecclesiastes is one of the wisdom books. The title of the book means member of the assembly, or preacher – it draws from the same word as ecclesial, which refers to a church or assembly. The text identifies the author as a son of David, the King – obviously referring to Solomon – but most scholars consider this a literary device, rather than a literal truth. The form of Hebrew used in the book is much later than Solomon's reign and contains many foreign words. It is likely, given Solomon's legendary wisdom, that identification of Solomon as the author is intended to reflect the ultimate origin of the good advice and wisdom in Ecclesiastes with the famous king.

On the face of it, Ecclesiastes can be a somewhat depressing work to read. Throughout the book, the efforts and work of man are said to be futile and pointless. The author affirms the mortality of humanity, but seems to be less certain about the immortality of the soul. Some commentators have gone so far as to say that Ecclesiastes denies the afterlife, and Protestants such as Martin Luther have used the book to argue for the heretical position of “soul sleep” - the idea that the dead know nothing between death and the Final Judgment.

However, the book constantly exhorts the reader to nobility and decent living and – most importantly – trust in God. In this way, it has much in common with the book of Job, a man who seems to live his life – difficult though it is – in complete accord with the principles of Ecclesiastes.

Ultimately, while Ecclesiastes might lack the superficial happiness of secular books and even other parts of the Bible, it encourages faithfulness to God in adversity, and encourages the reader to focus on things not under the Sun, but above the Sun. This construction – a distinction between the high and the low – will be familiar to the Christian reader from Saint Paul's exhortation to focus on the things of Heaven, not the things of Earth. Seen in the light of the Christian experience – the rejection of the base pleasures of earthly things and a focus on the spiritual pleasures of Heaven – Ecclesiastes makes much more sense.

However, as a Catholic, you must be ready to not only read and understand Ecclesiastes, but also defend the faith against misapplied verses from it. The somewhat dour, depressing tone of the book has led many to believe – in defiance of the clear teaching of the Church and other scriptural references – to hold to erroneous beliefs about the afterlife. In particular, the heresy of “soul sleep” and – in some cases – a denial of the very concept of the afterlife at all, even arguing for destruction of the human soul after death.

These heresies are pernicious and common, and often appear independently among people who have read the Bible without the benefit of the Church's teaching guiding them. Remember; there is no legitimate interpretation of the Bible outside of the teaching of the Catholic Church and the Bible is a Church document first and foremost. However, we must also remember that many of those who hold this and other heresies do so not out of malice, but simple ignorance and poor catechesis.

Ecclesiastes urges us to live lives faithful to God, and one of the spiritual works of mercy is to instruct the ignorant in the faith. There is nothing better than to help a fellow man know and love God even more. So, read Ecclesiastes and familiarize yourself with the teaching of the Church and how to defend it.

Song of Songs

The Song of Songs is one of the most misunderstood books of the Bible. Also known as the **Song of Solomon**, this is one of the wisdom books. At first glance, some might say this is because there is nowhere else to put it – but the truth of the matter is this book contains just as much good advice and spiritual guidance as the rest of the wisdom books, albeit in a format we might find unconventional in a religious text.

The full title – The Song of Songs Which Is Solomon's – shows the work is ascribed to Solomon, King of Israel, son of David, as are many of the wisdom books. Scholarship suggests this isn't the case, giving a date of around the 4th or 5th century before Christ. Solomon is an appealing author, not only because of his wisdom, but because of the many concubines and wives he had.

The text is, unashamedly, a love poem – or, rather, collection of love poems. There are five poems, epilogue, prologue and appendix. When given a cursory reading there is nothing more here than romantic love poetry – the language used is beautiful, even though much of the imagery is unfamiliar to our modern ears, drawing on the traditions of the near-East and the Israelites experiences as a nomadic, agrarian and grazing-animal herding culture.

The piece is also unashamedly erotic – not in the manner of modern pornography, but rather by extolling the virtues of married love and the physical pleasures between a man and a woman. This aspect of love – the expression of love between a husband and wife – is central to the theology of matrimony and, as the first vocation of the majority of the laity throughout history, an understanding of married love is vital for all Catholics. The Song of Songs gives us an example of erotic, romantic love which is not only beautiful, but also Scriptural and inspired by God.

But the piece is included in the Biblical canon not merely because it is beautiful and helpful to understanding marriage and authentic Christian sexuality. The Jewish people saw the romance between the beloved and the lover as allegorical of the love between God and His chosen people. And this, of course, foreshadows the more perfect expression of the love between Christ and His Church.

The Church is described as the Bride of Christ, and His Mystical Body as described in Ephesians chapter 5 : 23. Man and wife are one flesh and so these two expressions of the relationship of God and His Church flow together most perfectly. Some might object that God's relationship with the Church is not sexual, which the Song of Songs clearly describes and

married relationships clearly are – but that misses the central point, and the most profound imagery of the Song of Songs.

We – human beings – are not spiritual creatures with a body. We are physical AND spiritual beings. We do not HAVE bodies, we ARE bodies. It is for this reason that our first parents' sin was a physical thing, done with their bodies, that our personal sins of the flesh are damning and – most importantly – why Christ's salvation of us was accomplished with His Flesh on the physical Cross and is accomplished with the physical sacraments of the Church.

Our salvation – our relationship with Christ, and His relationship with the Church – is a physical relationship. Love between humans is physical – mothers nurse sons, fathers cuddle daughters, and husbands and wives share the sacred physical union of sex which brings forth new life. Christ's relationship with the Church is unique, of course, but when using the imperfect human expressions of love as an allegory for Christ's love for the Church, the love between husband and wife is the closest we can get. Why? Because husbands and wives are called not only to have a sacrificial, physical love for each other – to die to the world for each other – but only in marital love can new life be created. Procreation – participation in creation, working with God to make the future citizens of Heaven – is one of the highest things a human can do, and so this imagery – of erotic, matrimonial love – is perhaps the most appropriate for the relationship between God and His Church.

Intro to Prophets

There are several prophetic books in the Bible – writings of the prophets – and in order to understand them it is first important to understand what a prophet is.

When we speak of prophets and prophecy we tend to have a vision of a crazy old man making wild predictions which are all-but-impossible to decipher, couched in symbolic language, and which can be interpreted in many different ways. While there have been prophets like this, the prophets of God aren't like this – although many of them could be – and were! - seen as crazy old men.

A prophet is one who speaks the truth, a divine truth, to people. He is inspired by God to do so, and can do so in many different ways. He might make strange predictions, speaking in parables or metaphor, or he might make warnings, laments, and satires or use other devices to get his point across. Generally speaking, a prophet of God brings a very simple message. In today's language, we might characterize this message as “Straighten up and fly right” - quit sinning, follow God's commandments, start living right.

By virtue of our baptism and confirmation – and if you aren't baptized and confirmed, you need to do that just as soon as you can – by virtue of our baptism and confirmation we are priest, prophet and king. That doesn't mean we share the full gifts and powers of these offices, but we do share in them. As prophet, we are called to speak the truth to people. You won't have the same divine inspiration as a man like Isaiah or Daniel, but you DO have the teaching of the Church, the Scriptures and your own God-given intellect. You are perfectly capable of going out there and being a prophet – of preaching the truth of God to people, of admonishing the sinner and instructing the ignorant, of helping to bring people back to God though the telling of the truth.

But when we speak of the prophetic books we are, of course, talking about those who share fully in the office of Prophet – the Old Testament Prophets of God. There were prophets in the early monarchy who interpreted the word of God for the Kings. Later on, the great prophets appeared following the collapse of the monarchy and the Babylonian captivity beginning in 587 BC. These men are the ones whose wisdom was recorded and written down – usually after the fact, and by their followers. In this regard, prophetic literature shares much with wisdom literature.

A central theme runs through all of the prophets – to live a good life, to return to God and to keep his commandments. The specifics of this vary depending on the time and to whom they were speaking, but the general message is the same. In addition to this, several of the prophets look forward to the coming of the Messiah, prophesying the birth of Christ and His ministry, death and resurrection. In this regard, prophets are the Old Testament equivalent of Apostles – Apostles are sent by Christ to bring His message to the world, Prophets are sent by God the Father to speak about God the Son.

There are eighteen prophetic books in the Bible – six Major Prophets and twelve Minor Prophets. In the Jewish scriptures, the Minor Prophets are grouped together and usually count as a single book. The division into Major and Minor is not based on the quality or importance of writing – many of the Minor prophets have a great deal of importance to say – but is rather based on LENGTH of writing. The traditional method of recording writing in ancient Israel – the scroll – was a medium of a fixed maximum length. The Major Prophets were ones who had written enough to fill an entire scroll on their own, while the Minor Prophets didn't write quite that much.

A brief note on the ordering of the Minor Prophets – depending on what version of the Bible you have, and specifically if it is based on the Vulgate or the Masoretic text, the order of the Minor Prophets will be slightly different. For this study, we're going to be using the Vulgate order – although it makes little difference and the change of ordering is minor.

Isaiah

The book of the prophet Isaiah is the first and one of the most significant prophetic books, although Isaiah is not the earliest of the great prophets – he was alive in the 8th century BC. Based on clues in the text, Isaiah could have been prophesying for over 60 years, giving him a long and illustrious career.

There is no biographical information about Isaiah found outside Scripture, so everything we know of him comes from the Bible. He lived under the rule of several Jewish Kings, during a period of great military drama and upheaval. His life ended during the reign of the King Manasseh, who instituted pagan worship and reversed positive religious reforms made by his father. The Scriptures don't say HOW Isaiah died, but tradition and non-canonical sources maintain he suffered martyrdom during Manasseh's pagan reveal.

There are a couple of different ways to break the book of Isaiah into sections; the first is through theme and subject. The first 39 chapters give prophecies of doom and destruction for a faithless Judah and all nations which defy God – a very common theme in all prophetic literature, as you will see as we work through the various prophetic books in the Bible! This section records the warnings given by Isaiah to the Jews, and should function for us as an abjuration to remain faithful. Really, the prophetic works are full of this sort of writing – dire warnings to faithless people about the coming catastrophe if faithfulness is not restored.

As Catholics, we should focus not on the imagery of corporate harm – the destruction of our nation or the Church – but apply the concept individually; our faithlessness, sinfulness and failure to repent leads to the death of the life of God within us, and that – at the end of our life – will send us to Hell.

The remaining 27 chapters look forward to the restoration of the Kingdom of Israel and the new creation of the Kingdom of God. These prophecies, of course, are fulfilled with the coming of Jesus Christ and the establishment of the Church of the New Covenant.

The traditional view is that the entire book was written in the 8th century by Isaiah, although this view has been challenged in the modern period. One can look at the structure of Isaiah by date of composition; the first 39 chapters

are known as Proto-Isaiah – meaning “First Isaiah” - the next 16 are Deutero – or second – Isaiah and the final 11 are Trito – or third – Isaiah. Based on evidences in the text, some scholars feel Proto-Isaiah was written in the 8th century BC, Deutero-Isaiah in the 6th century, and Trito-Isaiah after the Babylonian Captivity which ended around 538 BC. This gives a three-part format of pre-Exilic, Exilic, and post-Exilic.

Of course, as already mentioned, it was common for the words of a prophet to be recorded by his followers long after the fact, being gathered together to form a coherent work. The office of the prophet was to speak the truth, not necessarily to form scriptures, and it fell to followers later on to record their sayings. Really, the notion that the work might have been written in three periods and then edited into a harmonious whole does not challenge the idea that the prophecies are Isaiah's – the oral tradition of the Jews was strong and would have ensured such important information was faithfully recorded. Presenting the prophecies within the context of the historically significant Babylonian Exile – seen by the Jews as a consequence of their infidelity – gives weight and structure to them.

But for Catholics the greatest portion of Isaiah are the prophecies which look forward to the Messiah. Of course, those prophecies have been fulfilled in Christ and so we can look back on them with the benefit of hindsight and it is all-but-impossible to not see Christ in the words Isaiah speaks – but even without that it is hard to imagine how anyone familiar with Isaiah who saw Christ's crucifixion could NOT see the parallels! Of course, the Jewish leadership in 33 AD somehow – perhaps through malice, perhaps through ignorance – managed to do this. We may never know how or why.

The most significant passages are something called the Songs of the Suffering Servant – a title given to Christ repeatedly through the Church's history. These are poems, found in the latter half of Isaiah, in chapter 42 verses 1 to 4, chapter 49 verses 1 to 6, chapter 50 verses 4 to 9 and chapter 52 verse 12 to chapter 53 verse 12. There is a fifth poem, which does not use the word “servant”, which is very similar in chapter 61 verses 1 to 3. This poem is explicitly quoted by Christ when John the Baptist sends his disciples to ask if Christ is the Messiah.

This gives a solid, ringing endorsement to the prophecies of Isaiah, and especially the songs of the suffering servant, as applying to Christ. These prophecies were not written after the fact to match up with Christ's life, but existed for centuries before and were well known to the Jews. There was no way Christ (were He a mere human) could have manipulated His life to conform to the prophecies – they match too closely and there are things beyond a man's control in them.

No, we must conclude that either the greatest coincidence in the history of the world happened, or that Jesus really was the person Isaiah was speaking about. If we have moments of doubt – and there is no shame in that – then reading Isaiah can help us overcome them and see the grand plan God has set in motion, coming into fruition in Christ.

Jeremiah

The book of the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah was active before and during the Babylonian Captivity, and it fell to him to prophesy about the invasion and deportation under Nebuchadnezzar. This was, obviously, not a popular task – the final deportation occurred in 587 BC and only a few short years before in 622 BC there had been a great national and religious revival after the deuteronomic reforms. It was hard for the Jews to accept this impending disaster, especially when the warning is about faithlessness and not military readiness.

Regardless, Jeremiah takes to his task with a will – despite his retiring nature and great desire to NOT be a prophet. All of us can learn much from Jeremiah – he speaks very frankly to God and makes his objection plain, but does what he is called to do anyway, even when he is vilified and imprisoned.

In 605 AD Nebuchadnezzar advanced into Israel. The King's hatred towards Jeremiah led him to burn the scroll of Jeremiah's earlier prophecies, and so the book is a re-creation, likely thanks to the prophet's scribe Baruch. As a result, the book is not in a chronological order and is rather grouped by subject matter. Baruch is also likely to be the person who added the biographical details about Jeremiah – it is unlikely the humble prophet would have bothered with them.

There is much of great interest in Jeremiah – it is a fairly long book, and deals with a tumultuous period in Jewish history, shortly before a great military defeat and suffering inflicted on the people. The additional reading will help you explore this, but the main element we – as Christians – should take is not the prophecies of coming disaster. Of course, these are historically interesting and serve as a salutary warning against infidelity, but the main focus should be on the more hopeful prophecies of Jeremiah.

In Jeremiah, we read explicit prophecies of the New Covenant, saying how it will differ from the Old Covenant, explicitly Messianic prophecies pointing towards Christ. As in Isaiah, it is all-but-impossible to read these prophecies and NOT see them fulfilled in Jesus Christ, in fact the Gospel writers quote from them as they are fulfilled in Jesus. This hopefulness, (the looking toward to the coming of Christ,) delivered by a man enduring persecution for the sake of the mission God has given him, is the model for how we – in our limited, incomplete manner – should fulfill the office of prophet.

Lamentations

The Lamentations of Jeremiah. As the name suggests, these are sad songs or poems, grieving over horrible things, and are traditionally ascribed to the pen of Jeremiah. Because of this, in some Bibles the five laments are part of the book of Jeremiah, meaning that these Bibles have only 72 books. Such Bibles were common in the earlier part of the 20th century, and this led to a simple method by which one could know the number of books in the Bible and the Old and New Testaments; all one needed to do was remember either 27 or 72, and then do a bit of math. There were 72 books in the whole Bible and those two digits reversed were 27, and that is the number of books in the New Testament.

Jeremiah's authorship has been challenged by modern scholars – saying they are unlike the rest of his work. But this is really an unfair criticism; they are a different form of writing - poetry rather than prophetic prose – and the influence of Baruch as a scribe and editor on the destroyed prophecies of Jeremiah means a variation would be natural.

Certainly, almost all scholars are in agreement that the laments were written shortly after and in response to the sack of Jerusalem and the deportation in 587 BC, and were likely written by an eyewitness to the events. Jeremiah was there for that, saw it happen, and was left behind in the ruins after being freed by the invading Nebuchadnezzar. So, really, he is an ideal candidate for author, especially when tradition – even to this day – notes a small cave where he retired in grief to write the laments.

Four of the poems are acrostics – that is, a poem whose initial letters of each line or stanza form a word, phrase or logical progression. In this case, they follow the order of the Hebrew alphabet. This was a fairly common structure for Jewish poetry, prayer and song – Psalms 24, 33, 36 and 118 all use this format.

The songs clearly belong to the genre of “City Lament”, a genre common in ancient Mesopotamia but all-but-unknown today. The idea of a poem or song expressing grief and sadness perhaps seems strange to us, but it was an important part of many ancient cultures, and is also found in opera today. As Christians, we should not shy away from grief and sadness – it is not only healthy to grieve, but it is the natural result of suffering a loss. Christ does not promise that we will never know grief; rather that our grief will turn to joy and that – ultimately – there will be no more tears.

The Church uses the laments liturgically during Holy Week, a time of grief and sadness which soon gives way to joy, and when we read Lamentations we should do so in the same mind. It is very easy to read into Lamentations an expression of grief for almost any suffering, and we should focus on the exhortations to plead with God for mercy and forgiveness. Ultimately, suffering in the world is a result of sin – our own, personal, sins, or the Original Sin of Adam and Eve. The cure for the sin, and thus the cure for suffering, is Christ.

The appropriate Christian response when reading Lamentations should be to lament our sufferings, but not to blame them on God but rather see the truth of the matter and humbly ask for mercy, forgiveness and help.

Ezekiel

The book of the prophet Ezekiel. Throughout the Christian period, the book of Ezekiel has inspired artists – both religious artists seeking to represent sacred things, and secular artists seeking nothing more than a strange muse – to produce a great deal of art. Ezekiel's visions, described vividly with great detail, can seem strange and outlandish to us – they are full of grand scenes, strange creatures and powerful depictions of God.

Human beings being what we are, we have a tendency to latch onto the strange, outlandish and just plain weird, and we end up spinning all sorts of crazy ideas out of it. Such is the case with the visions of Ezekiel – some Christians dissect them, looking at tiny little details, twisting them so they seem to apply to current events, emphasizing some parts and ignoring others, and coming up with one crazy theory or another.

Avoid this kind of lunacy. As Saint Peter tells us in his second letter, it is dangerous and unstable people who twist the Scriptures. But, beyond that, to fixate on a single – erroneous – interpretation of Scripture means you are missing the value of the word of God. No prophecy of Scripture is a matter of private interpretation, as Saint Peter also says in his second letter, and so we should shy away from any interpretation or speculation which is not in accord with the teaching of the Church.

Ezekiel prophesied in Babylon, after the first siege of and deportation from Jerusalem in 598 BC but before the sack and mass deportation in 587 BC, as he predicts this event. As with many of the prophets, the text we have is not organized chronologically by the date the prophecies were made, but rather grouped thematically by sequence of thought by his disciples after the fact.

The main focus of the prophecies is the coming of the Messiah, and specifically the New Covenant. Ezekiel makes it clear that the future of the Jewish people – that is, the people who will be ready to receive the Messiah – does not lie with those left back in Jerusalem, but by the exiled people now held captive in Babylon. He calls them to personal repentance, conversion and holiness, emphasizing that corporate sinfulness – the sins of their ancestors – do not apply, and that people are responsible for their own sins.

The new spirit and new covenant is spoken of; it is here that we find the idea God will PERSONALLY lead his people as shepherd – a clear foreshadowing and prophecy of the Messiah Jesus Christ. The work concludes with the prophecy of the Third Temple.

A word should be said about this section of the book, because one can quickly fall into error if one departs from the Church's teaching on this subject. Historically, the First Temple was the one built by Solomon, and destroyed during the sack of Jerusalem in 587 BC. The Second Temple was built by Herod, and was the Temple standing during Christ's earthly life. It was destroyed by Titus and the 10th Legion in 70AD – the destruction of Jerusalem alluded to by Christ several times, most notably in Luke's Gospel during His passion.

The Third Temple – not called by that name, of course – is described in great detail in Ezekiel. The Church's interpretation is NOT of a physical Temple to be built at some future date, looking towards a restoration of Jewish Temple sacrifice. There is no more Temple sacrifice with the coming of the Messiah – as Daniel says in chapter 9 verse 27 of his book, “He shall cause the sacrifice and oblation to cease.”

The New Temple is Christ Himself – as He says to the Samaritan woman at the well, a time will come when people don't worship on the mountain or the Temple, but will worship Him through the Eucharist. Thus, the Third Temple needs to be understood Eucharistically, as referring to the authentic worship of Christ through Holy Communion, not as a physical Temple which will be built and will be the site of sacrifice in the future.

There is ONE sacrifice in the New and EVERLASTING Covenant – the sacrifice of Christ on Calvary, which is re-presented to us at every Mass. The new Covenant is EVERYLASTING – that is, there will not be a rebuilding of the Temple, a going back to animal sacrifices. The old covenant is gone and no longer applies.

That is the Church's teaching, and is contrasted with the teaching of certain Jewish and Protestant sects – especially those politically connected with modern-day Zionism – which is that the rebuilding of the Temple and the reinstatement of animal sacrifice will occur at some future date. For Jews to teach this is understandable – they reject Christ as Messiah and so the once-for-all sacrifice on Calvary is ignored – but it is difficult to understand how Protestant Christians can accept this belief.

Protestants pride themselves on their belief in Christ and trust in Him – to be point of, incorrectly, accusing Catholics of idolatry because we acknowledge Mary and the Saints – so it make no logical sense for them to expect a restoration of valid sacrifice in a new Temple. Be ready to make these arguments with Protestants who might delve deep into Ezekiel and come up with some outlandish theory.

Daniel

The book of the prophet Daniel. The book describes the life of Daniel, a young man in the brilliant court of Babylon. He and his friends are deported to the city in 606 BC, and are trained – because they are so clever – as advisers to the Babylonian court. However, despite the glory of Babylon, Daniel never converts to the pagan religion, but keeps his Jewish faith.

Gifted by God with divine wisdom and the ability to interpret dreams and prophesy, Daniel rises in importance in the Babylonian court, interpreting dreams for the King Nebuchadnezzar and warning him about the coming overthrowing of his kingship. Daniel survives the overthrow of Nebuchadnezzar, and is important under Darius, the King who rules after Nebuchadnezzar. However, his enemies plot against him, resulting in him being thrown into a pit of lions, one of the most famous episodes in the Old Testament.

In addition to his own life and adventures – which you should read not only for spiritual reflection, but also because they are just rip-roaring tales of excitement and daring-do! - Daniel has several visions which he recounts in great detail. Like the visions of Ezekiel, these prophecies are fantastical and dramatic, and have been subject to various strange interpretations by those Saint Peter describes as unstable. However, unlike many other prophecies, the interpretation for these is given right there in the narrative; they are visions sent by God to Daniel and a degree of explanation immediately follows from the Almighty. Of course, there is still room to interpret – and make mistakes – so be on your guard against the hubris of personal interpretation.

Most of the visions concern geopolitical events which have now happened – events such as the conquests of Alexander, the rise of the Greek and Roman Empires and so forth. Some people read current geopolitical events into these prophecies – the European Union is a popular theme – but this is really not the purpose of the visions. We should not try to predict some future event with these visions – the details of the future are not ours to know, and can distract us from the central message of both Daniel and the Gospel; a message of hope calling us to repentance and a relationship with the Son of Man who is Christ.

A word must be said about the different versions of the book of Daniel. Portions of the book do not exist in the Hebrew texts, existing only in the Greek Septuagint. These portions are the song of the three youths in the fire furnace – a wonderful prayer of thanksgiving and praise of God – and the tales of the beautiful widow Susanna and Bell & the Dragon. These tales show the wisdom of Daniel – he deals with unfair accusations against Susanna by the classic detective's trick of separating the witnesses and seeing if their stories match (guess what, they don't!)

He defeats the priests of the idol Bel by the simple but brilliant trick of watching for secret doors and catching them in their trickery, and he kills a dragon through chemical warfare. Read the passage – it is the 14th chapter of the book. Daniel is faced with an actual, real-life Dragon – the Bible makes it VERY clear this is a real dragon, not an idol, not a metaphor, but a big ol' lizardsy thing that eats – presumably – princesses and knights with slow reactions. Daniel says he defeated the dragon not with a spear or a club but with the power of the Living God and as an illustration of the awesome power of God. The King, perhaps hoping to see a messy end to Daniel's hubris, permits him to attempt this and the prophet feeds the dragon a ball of pitch and tar, which causes the dragon to explode.

These wonderful passages are simply not there in the Hebrew or Protestant versions of the Bible, and this is a great shame – not least because they were actively removed by Martin Luther in defiance of twelve-hundred years or more of tradition. Do read them, and arm yourself with the tools to defend them.

Hosea

The book of the prophet Hosea. Hosea is the first of the so-called Minor Prophets – as mentioned before these prophets are not minor because of quality or holiness, but rather because of quantity of writing. Hosea's book is fairly short, although he is regarded as of great importance. In the Jewish Talmud, he is said to be the greatest prophet of his generation – a generation which included Isaiah!

Regardless of the truth of that statement, it is clear Hosea is an important author in the Old Testament. He lived in the Northern Kingdom in the 8th century BC. His name is the Hebrew word for “salvation” or “help”, and is connected to the names Joshua and Yehoshua, which was ultimately Hellenized as Jesus. Obviously, for the Messiah to be called “salvation” is most appropriate, but the name itself was not uncommon.

Hosea's family life is explored in his book; the very first thing we read is the rather shocking instruction from God for him to marry a whore, and have children with a whore, because the Jewish people are like a whore in God's eyes for abandoning Him. God Himself names Hosea's children, giving them symbolic names which support the symbolism of the marriage between the prophet and his ultimately unfaithful wife, which is an allegory for the relationship of God and the people Israel.

Hosea's marriage is used to represent the faithlessness of Israel to God's commands, and the subsequent divorce and redemption of the enslaved wife foreshadows what will happen to Israel if she does not repent of her evil.

The traditional Christian reading of Hosea – and how we should read the book as Catholics – is, of course, through the lens of Christ as the husband and the Church as the bride. This is a traditional way of looking at the Church, found not only in the writings of the Fathers, but through the New Testament and also in the Song of Songs in the Bible.

The importance of faithfulness should be understood both corporately – as the Church as a whole – and personally – as individual Christians. While the idea of abandonment should not be read into the allegory to the same degree as in the Jewish understanding – Christ will never abandon His Church, nor does He withdraw Himself and His grace from individual believers – the importance of fidelity should be stressed. We are called – corporately and personally – to be faithful to Christ and, as expressed in much Wisdom literature, must have a relationship with Him which mirrors that of a wife to her husband.

Joel

The book of the prophet Joel. Little is known about him – the name Joel may be a pseudonym, as it means “worshiper of the Lord” (although, of course, there is no reason why a worshiper of the Lord would not be given a name which meant exactly that, purely by coincidence). Even the date of composition is not known – dates have been suggested as early as the 9th century BC or as late as the post exilic period around 400 BC; these two extremes span almost the entire history of Old Testament prophetic writing.

The book is divided into two parts – the first is a call to repentance, while the second is a promise of salvation for all nations; a clear reference to the coming of Christ. Astute listeners will notice this is the standard pattern for prophetic works; a warning to repent, often with dramatic language and the threat of suffering, followed by the promise of renewal under the new covenant and Messiah.

A couple of points make Joel stand out, however – the first is the opening plague of locusts described by Joel. The traditional view – held by the Church Fathers – has been that this was a metaphorical plague, not a literal event. In the allegory, the locusts are the enemies of Israel – if this allegorical interpretation is chosen then it can be used as an argument for the later dating. The description of how the nibblers, then the grown locusts, then the hoppers, and then the shearers eat the grain would be a good way of illustrating the repeated sieges of and deportations from Jerusalem, culminating in the sacking of the city and the great deportation in 587 BC.

The other interesting element in Joel occurs at the beginning of the second section, the prophecies about the coming of Christ, at the beginning of chapter 3. Here God, speaking through Joel, says; “I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions.”

This verse is explicitly quoted by Peter in his sermon on Pentecost, proving that Joel should definitely be in the Bible, as opposed to some Protestant beliefs. The dramatic quality of this prophecy and Peter's speech really hammers home the nature of what was happening. The same goes for the third chapter of Joel and the second chapter of Acts. You should read verses side-by-side.

The prophets – all of them, major and minor – had prophesized the coming of the Messiah through calls to repentance and a promise of new hope. And now, with the birth, life, death, Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus all those prophecies had come to fruition. The entire universe had changed – from the pre-Messianic world of the prophets; we had entered the Messianic world of the apostles.

Peter, chief of the apostles, chose the words of the prophet Joel to announce this, showing the importance of this minor prophet.

Amos

The book of the prophet Amos. Amos was a shepherd, preaching in the northern kingdom. His preaching uses a lot of rural imagery – natural for a shepherd – and he preached against the dangers of wealth and luxury as well as the traditional spiritual infidelity prophets warned against. During the period he was preaching – around 750 BC – both the northern and southern kingdoms were rich and prosperous, and so the spiritual dangers of being rich were immediate and pressing.

Dating the book of Amos is relatively easy – he specifically writes the visions were received two years before a great earthquake, a matter of historical record and mentioned in Zechariah's book too. There is some disagreement about where the work was written – it is agreed he wrote it in a town called Tekoa, but it is not clear whether this city was in the northern or southern kingdom. Scholars have used various agricultural and geopolitical arguments to attempt to settle the question, but it is not clear.

Amos is the first book of prophecy in the Bible to be written, and so occupies an important place in the Scriptures. The central themes – of God's power, social justice and divine judgment because of infidelity to God – are the standard themes for other prophetic books.

In the book, Amos warns against greed and even speaks about the growing of cash-crops such as wine and oil rather than food to be eaten – we should not over-apply this economic teaching, but there is an important lesson there concerning avarice. It is valuable to understand that a warning against financial greed is not confined to the New Testament period, but was also found in the Old Covenant.

Amos also speaks of the Day of the Lord – a common theme in Jewish prophecy. For the Israelites, the Day of the Lord is when the Lord will return and fight against their enemies – but Amos changes this up a little. He reveals Israel ITSELF as an enemy of God; he shows that they are guilty of cruelty and injustice against the vulnerable.

Again, we should not seek to over-apply this prophecy with some kind of replacement theology idea, but – rather – we should recognize this for what it is; as well as a warning against suffering that will fall on Israel thanks to coming invasions, sieges and deportations, but also as a prediction of the coming of the Messiah and the fate of those who reject Him and the teaching of God. Throughout the New Testament, Christ Himself predicts what Amos had spoken of nearly 800 years before.

There is much in Amos which we can read and understand in our lives today – the warning against the temptations of riches is most appropriate. So too are the exhortations to repentance, the warnings against excessive legalism in worship and more. Really, Amos – the first prophetic book, so very early, is one which all Christians should read and understand.

Obadiah

The book of the prophet Obadiah. This is a very short book indeed, shorter than most of the epistles of the New Testament, only one or two pages in most Bibles. Very short, but very powerful. It is neither nothing more nor nothing less than a simple promise of vengeance from God against the Edomites, a people who attacked the Jews. The dating of writing can be inferred from finding out WHEN this attack happened; there are two historical candidates – in the mid-9th century BC when Israel was invaded by Philistines and Arabs, and shortly after the siege and sacking of Jerusalem in 587 BC. The book was probably composed very shortly after one of those events – scholarly consensus is for the 587 BC date.

You will, doubtless, have noticed the date 587 BC is a very significant one when it comes to discussing the work of the prophets. The Babylonian siege, deportation and captivity were a key event in the history of the Jews, predicted by the prophets and used as a warning against infidelity. A solid understanding of the historical reality of what happened is very helpful when studying the New Testament.

The prophets taught that the Babylonian captivity was the result of the Jews' unfaithfulness, that Nebuchadnezzar was an agent of God, acting to bring punishment on them in accord with divine justice. But in Obadiah we read how God plans to punish those who attacked the Jews – in Daniel, we read of the punishment of Nebuchadnezzar himself, through a dream interpreted by Daniel. How are we to reconcile these seeming-contradictions; of God using someone to punish the Jews, but then punishing the punishers?

We should return to the first moral principle – do no harm. We cannot do evil for any reason, even to achieve good. Good might come of evil – by stealing, one could get money to feed the hungry, for example – but that does NOT justify or permit the evil. Not ever!

However, the good which is done – for example feeding the hungry – is still a good. It is not a good achieved in the right way, and it does the person performing evil to achieve good no favors at all, but the end result is still good. And this is what happens with those men who do evil to the people of God, and whom God uses as instruments of justice.

A couple of examples are instructive; Nebuchadnezzar deports the Jews and he suffers. The Edomites participate in this assault and are promised suffering and vengeance. And, Pilate – through cowardice – orders the death of Jesus Christ. No-one can doubt that the death of Christ resulted in a wonderful good; namely, the salvation of the human race! But the unjust condemnation of Christ by Pilate is an evil act, an act Pilate will either suffer for or will have to repent. As an aside, there is an Eastern Christian tradition that Pilate DID repent and WAS converted, by the agency of Mary Magdalene and an egg. He is actually a saint in the Ethiopian Church.

That interesting story aside, this should help you understand what is happening with these promises of vengeance in Obadiah against the Edomites, a nation whom God used as instruments of His justice. We should be careful to not fall into the trap of thinking this text is advocating human revenge; it is not. It is a promise of divine justice. The Edomites could have chosen to NOT do evil, but instead they chose to attack and persecute the Jews. God used their evil for good, but that does not let them – or us, or anyone else – off the hook for justice.

When you read Obadiah, compare the first nine verses with the 49th chapter of Jeremiah – if the later date of 587 BC is the period of writing, Obadiah would have been a contemporary of Jeremiah, which would go a long way to explaining the close parallels in these two passages of Scripture.

Jonah

The book of the prophet Jonah. Everyone knows the story, or at least part of it – it is a favorite of Sunday school or children's Bible studies. The part of the story people know is that Jonah gets eaten by a whale. Jonah is called by God to go to the great city of Nineveh and do what prophets do best – preach a warning about imminent destruction because of infidelity and evil. Jonah doesn't particularly want to do this, and so he runs away, buying passage on a boat. God's plans, however, are not something one can just away from by taking a cruise, and He sends a great storm which threatens to sink the ship.

The sailors are terrified, and they begin to pray to their gods, asking for the storm to be calmed. Jonah – who is asleep – is woken and asked to pray, but he says that HE is the reason for the storm and that his failure to obey the One True God is the reason for the storm. Jonah says God is angry at him, and asks to be thrown overboard so the sailors won't be drowned. They do this, the sea is calmed and the sailors convert to the worship of the true God.

God orders a whale to swallow Jonah. The text says “huge fish”, but whales were considered to be fish at the time because they live in the sea. In the belly of the whale, Jonah offers a heartfelt lament to God and makes promises of fidelity. God has the fish vomit Jonah back up on the dry land and tells him to go to Nineveh and fulfill his office as prophet.

Jonah does as God asks, and does SUCH a good job Nineveh converts – immediately, completely, and willingly. Sadly, Jonah is a bit of a miserable fellow, and he is very angry that God decides to NOT destroy the city. God – through the use of a plant which grows up and then dies – illustrates to Jonah the foolishness of his view; should we EAGERLY seek that others are destroyed?

The book of the prophet Jonah is very short, and very easy to read, and the lessons are obvious. The first is the clearest; do the will of God when He asks you! Granted, very few of us are likely to be told by God to prophesy the destruction of a great city like Nineveh, and even fewer of us are likely to be eaten by whales if we don't obey – but we should always do what God calls us to do. Resisting God's plans is not a good idea!

The second lesson is also clear; repent of our sins when we're told of them, or when we realize them. Repentance is how we are saved – without it, the sacrifice of Christ is of no avail to us. We must repent, say sorry, do penance. The normal way we do this as Christians is through confession – less dramatic than the sackcloth and ashes of Nineveh, but even more effective.

The final lesson is a key one, and a little more subtle. It is related to the parable of the workers in the vineyard – those who work a full day get the same pay as those who work only an hour. The lesson of this Gospel passage is that we should not be jealous of those who convert, repent or otherwise come to Christ later in life. In Jonah, there is a similar message – what right do we have to be angry when God's vengeance is withheld because a sinner repents?

When we hear of a notorious sinner – an active homosexual, an avowed atheist, a murderer, or perhaps just some celebrity living a wild life – who comes to Christ, do we react with the joy that exists in Heaven at the return of a sinner, or do we get angry and feel cheated that vengeance has been denied? Do we seek to support the person with prayers of thanksgiving and strength, or do we examine their life in microscopic detail to find flaws which “prove” their conversion is false?

This is a powerful lesson to take from Jonah – we should read this book with this in mind, and return to it whenever we find ourselves feeling angry, jealous or cheated about a sinner's return to the faith.

Micah

The book of the prophet Micah. Micah was a contemporary of Isaiah in the 8th century BC, and he shares the major prophet's vision of the Messianic line of David. He prophesies against many specific groups of people, with an emphasis on financial wickedness – oppressive rulers, cheats, thieves, false prophets – but the true jewels of the book are the Messianic prophecies.

Amid the dire warnings against the unfaithful and cruel, Micah says that the glory of Zion will be restored after its destruction, greater than it was before. He speaks of an era of universal peace where the great ruler will rule from Jerusalem, from the great Temple Mountain, and how even the Gentiles will abandon idolatry.

The Jews interpreted this as a Messianic prophecy, and it clearly is – in fact, Christ's birthplace is predicted in Micah chapter 5 verse 2, referenced explicitly in Matthew chapter 2 verse 6. There are other clear prophecies in Micah which are referenced in Matthew and Luke's Gospel, but the birthplace of the Messiah is the most significant.

Of course, one wonders how anyone who believed in the Prophets could reject Christ when He so perfectly fulfilled the prophecies, but many of the Jews of the time rejected Him and many Jews today reject Him. Studying the text of Micah, we can get inkling of what excuse could be used – the prophecies speak of rulership, of a kingdom, of mighty powers and glory. The Church does not have those attributes in an obvious way – the kingdom of God is explained by Christ in His parables, and it is a more subtle thing, a thing found in the heart of believers as well as in the Church.

Many of the Jews were expecting a great military king who would drive Israel's enemies into the sea, leading them to a glorious geopolitical victory. Of course, the victory of Christ is greater than the military successes of Genghis Khan, Alexander the Great and Napoleon combined – it is a victory over sin and death and the power of Hell! But, if one is expecting a merely human victory and political power, it might be difficult to think as God thinks.

And this is a warning to us all – as Saint Peter says, no prophecy of scripture is a matter of private interpretation. We should not seek to impose our own views on scripture, and should not reject things that come from God simply because they do not fit our preconceptions. God has His own agenda, and it is not necessarily our own.

Nahum

The book of the prophet Nahum. Little is known about him personally – his name means “comforter”, but given the nature of his writing this name is perhaps not very appropriate! Like Jonah before him, Nahum is sent to prophesy against the evils and cruelty of Nineveh. However, unlike the book of Jonah, Nahum gives the prophecies in detail but does not contain any narrative about how the Ninevehites respond.

History, however, makes this clear – they don't respond well. The prophet Zephaniah follows Nahum in warning Nineveh, and both warnings are ignored. In the last half of the 7th century BC, a series of disasters and invasions humble Nineveh and the whole of the Assyrian empire, changing the geopolitical face of Asia.

Perhaps Nahum's name IS appropriate when we look at it from the perspective of Israel – his entire book is a celebration of the collapse of the Assyrian empire, and contains elements of comfort and hope for those oppressed by the Assyrians. Nahum calls them endlessly cruel, and so it is clear there were a lot of people who would be eager to see them suffer and receive justice.

But we should not read Nahum in a “gotcha!” frame of mind; the Assyrians are destroyed because of their spiritual infidelity – Nahum uses quite vivid imagery of sexual infidelity and harlotry as both a sign and allegory for spiritual wickedness, as is common elsewhere in Scripture. In every respect, we – as individuals, as a Church and as a nation, are no better than the Assyrians – the only difference MIGHT be an issue of scale. We are sinners, and we need a savior and we need to repent. This is what the Assyrians did not do.

We should never read the prophecies of destruction with an eager joy which stems from revenge. Rather, any joy we feel should come from a delight in the justice of God and should be tempered with the certain knowledge we need to repent ourselves.

Habakkuk

The book of the prophet Habakkuk. Little is known about Habakkuk. Most of the other prophets have biographical details about the kings whose reign they prophesied under, their hometown and other information. For Habakkuk, we have nothing, although it is possible to infer some details from clues. His book consists of warnings against the Chaldean rulers of Babylon, whose rise to power occurred around 612 AD and who sacked Jerusalem in 587 BC. Accordingly, it is assumed he was active in the late 7th century, early 6th century BC.

Another clue is found in the concluding passages of the book. It finishes with a song, and so some scholars feel he was a member of the tribe of Levi who were the musicians in the Temple, although this is purely conjectural.

The book of Habakkuk is divided into three sections – a discussion between God and Habakkuk, a series of curses uttered against the oppressors of God's people, and a plea for deliverance from the oppressor given in the form of a Psalm.

The book of Habakkuk has much in common with the book of Job – alone among the prophets, Habakkuk openly questions the wisdom of God, something which appears often in the book of Job. The two books can be read side-by-side; each raises similar questions and answers them quite effectively.

Habakkuk is also related to Nahum and Obadiah; Habakkuk asks God why He tolerates the evil Babylonians and why He is planning to use them as His instrument of vengeance against His chosen people, the Jews. How does it make sense for God to use a truly evil empire to punish His wayward children?

God's answer relates to his words in Nahum and Obadiah – there WILL be punishment for the Babylonians, and that punishment will be severe. Ultimately, the book of Habakkuk seeks to move the reader from uncertainty and doubt about God's actions to a position of faith and trust in God – God has a plan, and all things work within that plan for our betterment and salvation.

When reading Habakkuk, we should attempt to understand that the persecution we experience at the hands of the world is part of the design of God. For the Jews, it was punishment for corporate and personal infidelity, and for us – as Christians – it is the persecution foretold by Christ. The world – ruled by Satan – hates the children of Heaven, who are his enemy.

The writing in Habakkuk is exceptionally fine, revealing a highly educated and skilled author, and we can enjoy the book for its various literary devices and techniques as well as its spiritual benefits. A good translation will help you appreciate the work as it was originally intended to be understood.

Zephaniah

The book of the prophet Zephaniah. The opening passage of the book gives clear details of when he received his prophecies, placing him in the middle of the 7th century BC. Like many of the prophets, he is warning against a coming calamity and punishment – he specifically uses the phrase “Day of the Lord”, a phrase also used by Amos.

This is the principal theme of his book; the coming judgment against Israel and the whole world for infidelity to God's commands. The punishment promised to Jerusalem is worse and more specific, because the Jews are God's chosen people, intended to be a light to the world, and they are judged to a higher standard. To whom much is given, much will be demanded as the Bible says.

The book is not merely a series of dire warnings, however – there are promises of joy as well, promising the restoration of Israel and a conversion of the gentiles. These are the Messianic prophecies, and while Zephaniah does not rise to the same level as many of the other prophets, there is a definite Messianic promise within his work.

As mentioned when we discussed Nahum, Zephaniah prophesied against Nineveh and the Assyrians – in the second chapter we read a general indictment against the nations, and also – from verse 13 onwards – a specific promise of destruction to the city of Nineveh. Alas for the Ninevehites, they did not heed the warning and were destroyed, after being used as God's instrument of punishment for many years.

The book of the prophet Zephaniah should be read alongside other prophetic books; it is the last of the pre-exilic prophets and so now is a good time to review the threats against the Jews which God makes and has fulfilled in the Babylonian captivity beginning in 587 BC. Read the additional materials and take a look back over the other pre-exile prophets.

Haggai

The book of the prophet Haggai. Haggai is the first of the postexilic prophets. The other two are Zechariah, who was contemporary with Haggai, and Malachi who lived about 100 years later.

A brief historical note is necessary to understand the post-exilic prophets. This period of Jewish history is covered in the historical books, specifically the books of Chronicles. The Jews suffered military defeats during the 6th and 7th century BC, culminating in the siege and sack of Jerusalem in 587 BC. The Jews were taken captive and hauled off to Babylon, where they were a people in exile. This suffering was foretold by the prophets, but so was a return and restoration of the Davidic kingdom and the nation-state of Israel.

In 538 BC, roughly fifty years after the deportation, the Persians conquered Babylon and Cyrus the Great gave a decree that the Jews should return to Jerusalem and begin rebuilding the Temple (which had been destroyed during the great sieges). Around 520 BC, the Jews began to return and – under the King Zerubbabel and the Priest Joshua – the foundations for the Second Temple were laid.

This period marked the beginning of a great restoration of the Jewish people, and was seen by many of them as the promised return to prominence and power the prophets had spoken off. The Messianic prophecies did not seem so far-fetched now – remember, the Jews were often a small, insignificant people in terms of geopolitical power, but they earnestly believed a great warlord and king would come from their line and rule the whole world.

This period of independence ended when the Persian Empire was conquered by Alexander. Around 110 BC, the Maccabean rebellion established another independent Jewish kingdom, which was conquered by the Romans in 63 BC. This, of course, set the stage for the Greek-speaking, Hellenic-influenced, Roman-ruled province of Judea with the glorious Second Temple into which Jesus was born.

In the sieges, the Temple had been destroyed. It is very difficult for us to understand just how significant the Temple was to Jewish worship – pre-Rabbinical Judaism was not a religion where worship could be offered anywhere; it could only be offered by sacrifices performed by the priests in the Temple. The Temple had to be on a specific place – the Temple mount – and, as was suitable for the worship of the Most High God, it had to be beautiful. The specific details given to Solomon for the construction of the First Temple were exacting and precise.

It was impossible for the Jews to offer pure worship without the Temple. The Temple was the center of religious life for the Jews. That is why Christ's words about destroying and rebuilding the Temple, and His statement that a time would

come when there would be no Temple worship, were so shocking. When the Second Temple was destroyed in 70 AD by Titus and the 10th Legion, this was a shattering blow to the Jews.

And so this is why Haggai gives such emphasis to rebuilding the Temple – the Jews have suffered at the hands of oppressors because of their unfaithfulness, but now God urges them to rebuild the Temple (despite their reluctance) and to offer pure worship. He promises to bless them, painting a glorious picture of the future.

There is little in Haggai which is specifically Messianic; the promises of power and glory can be read as simply geopolitical success. And this is how the Jews historically have interpreted them – that there will be a glorious restoration of Israel in secular power and might under the Messiah. This is one of the reasons for the rejection of Christ as Messiah, whose Kingdom is not of this world and whose fulfillment of the Messianic prophecies is quite different to how many Jews felt they should be fulfilled.

Zechariah

The book of the prophet Zechariah. Like Haggai, he was active shortly after the return to Jerusalem and exhorts the rebuilding of the Temple. It seems likely he was a priest as well as a prophet, given his interest in the Temple and pure worship.

Unlike the work of Haggai, however, Zechariah's book has more explicitly Messianic hope in there. Reading it, we can see many little details which are fulfilled in the Gospels. In chapter 9 verse 9 we see the prophecy of riding on a donkey, as Christ entered Jerusalem. Later on, we see thirty pieces of silver mentioned – and God describes them as the price people have valued HIM at. Certainly prophetic there!

The first eight chapters of the book concern themselves with the same themes as Haggai did – the restoration of the Temple and purity of worship. However, from chapter 9 onwards the work takes on many characteristics of apocalyptic literature. Although the work does not reach the full apocalyptic expression we see in Daniel and, ultimately, Revelation the elements are certainly there. It would be a great mistake to attempt to interpret the visions literally – they clearly are not – and we should also be careful, as mentioned before, to not interpret these visions outside of the teaching of the Church.

Malachi

The book of the prophet Malachi. The name Malachi means simply “my messenger”, so it is very possible this is not the real name of the author – all prophets could be described as a messenger of God. Some ancient Jewish sources feel Ezra may have been the author of Malachi, while some scholars feel that two prophecies in Zechariah and the one in Malachi (all beginning “Oracle, the Word of The LORD”) were originally a single, independent piece of work which were divided up – two being attached to Zechariah and the third becoming Malachi.

We may never know the truth this side of Heaven, but there is general consensus that Malachi was written about 100 years after the return to Jerusalem, in the 5th century BC. This is after the rebuilding of the Temple, and so Malachi is not concerned with urging for its rebuilding – as Haggai and Zechariah are – but rather with purity of observance and correct moral teachings. There are discourses against divorce in here, for example.

It is very appropriate that this book is the last of the Old Testament; because the alternating warnings against suffering because of infidelity and the encouragement towards moral living are very similar to the pattern adopted by Christ and the Christian writers in many of the New Testament books.

The messianic elements of Malachi are profound and frequent, and the book is extensively quoted and referenced in the New Testament. Two in particular stand out:

The first occurs at the beginning of chapter 3 – here Malachi prophesies John the Baptist, using language reminiscent of Isaiah. Although the Gospel writers credit Isaiah as the more famous prophet with the prophecy, it is clear Malachi is also giving the same prophecy of the voice crying in the wilderness who will prepare the way of the Lord. This prophecy occurs in connection with the coming Day of the Lord, revealing that the coming of the Messiah is to be understood as the day of the lord, a time of judgment on the people.

Obviously, the coming of Christ is not the final judgment – but there it does mark a time when we will have to make a choice; do we accept Christ, or refuse Him? Only when the Messiah has come can we make the choice to accept Him as Messiah or, as the Jews did, refuse Him as the Messiah because He does not – in our view – fulfill the prophecies of the Messiah.

But the most interesting quotation in Malachi is a ringing endorsement of the Eucharist. In an easy to remember verse, chapter 1, verse 11 (one-one-one,) the prophet writes that a pure sacrifice will be made among the nations, from the rising of the sun to its setting.

What is a pure sacrifice? Nothing mankind can offer is pure – all is flawed and damaged. Only God Himself is truly pure. And how can the nations – the Gentiles, the non-Jews, those who are not God's chosen people – offer a pure sacrifice? The gentiles do not have any kind of code of purity or special relationship. The only answer to this prophecy – that soon this Pure Sacrifice will be offered by the Gentiles and Everywhere – is the Eucharist, the Body, Blood Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ, God Himself. THIS is a pure sacrifice. THIS is offered from sunrise to sunset by the Church, and Malachi is prophesying this.

And this verse is a superb piece of Eucharistic Apologetics – remember the verse (it is easy to remember – one-one-one) and be ready to use it when addressing the issue with Protestants. The question they have to answer is; if this pure sacrifice is not the Eucharist, what is it? Is it the mere prayers of humans, with all our flaws and failings? Nothing can be pure except God Himself.

Intro to Deuterocanon

The Deuterocanon of the Bible are the seven books and parts of two others which Protestants call the Apocrypha. Five of these are historical books. Deuterocanon means “second canon”, meaning they were added later to the Scriptures – these were the last books of the Old Testament to be written.

The Protestants call them the Apocrypha, which means of uncertain provenance, and they reject them as Sacred Scripture. Catholics, together with the Orthodox and other groups of Christians, accept them as Sacred Scripture. And, most importantly, **so did Jesus Christ and the Apostles and the Early Church**. They have been part of the Bible from the very beginning of the process of canonization.

The inclusion of these books in the Canon of the Bible is a major point of difference between Catholics and Protestants, and you should be ready to defend the Catholic point of view.

During his conquests of the Middle East in the fourth century BC, Alexander of Macedon established a great center of learning, the city of Alexandria by Egypt. In the chaos following his death, one of his generals – and, if the rumors are true, his illegitimate half-brother – Ptolemy became Pharaoh of Egypt. Ptolemy's son, Ptolemy the second, was Pharaoh after him and he commissioned a translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek to be included in the Library of

Alexandria. This translation was the Septuagint, and it rapidly became the version of the Hebrew Scriptures used by the vast majority of the Jews.

It was the Greek Septuagint which was used by the Jews of Jesus' time – in fact, when the New Testament quotes from the Old Testament the vast number of quotations are from the Greek Septuagint. This shows the Septuagint was considered to be the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures by many Jews but, most importantly, was regarded as such by the early Christians.

The Septuagint included these seven extra books and parts of two others. These books were written in Greek and not Hebrew after the Babylonian Exile and the scattering of the Jewish people.

After Jesus Christ ascended to Heaven, the Church began its great mission of evangelization – this is the period covered by the book of Acts and the letters of Saint Paul. In 70 AD, the Roman General Titus and the tenth legion laid siege to Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple. The priesthood was killed and the rabbis fled the city, eventually settling in the town of Jamnia where they formed a school of Jewish thought.

Around 100 AD, these rabbis decided to come up with a list of accepted Scriptures, because they were finding themselves under intellectual and theological assault from Christianity – they wanted to make a list of scriptures which were acceptable to Jews who DENIED that Christ was the Messiah. So, they excluded all the books of what we call the New Testament and selectively chose from what we call the Old Testament. They rejected the Greek Septuagint and went with the books just written in Hebrew.

So, now there are two lists of Old Testament Scriptures – the ones used by Christians, and the ones used by Jews who reject Jesus Christ. The list used by Christians includes the seven Deuterocanonical books, and the Jewish list does not.

The Catholic Church then starts formally assembling the Bible, gathering the books together, translating them first into Latin and then into other languages, copying them, publishing them and so forth. This goes on for hundreds of years, until the early 1500s when a German Monk called Martin Luther comes on the scene.

Luther led a revolt against the Church known today by the misleading title of the Reformation. He rejected the priesthood and the sacraments, and came up with a unique and silly theology not supported by the Bible called Sola Fide and Sola Scriptura. You can learn more about just why these ideas are wrong in the apologetics series, but for now it is enough to say that Luther wanted to cut books out of the Bible – remember, the Bible had been settled and published for about 1100 years by this point. He wanted to remove the seven Deuterocanonical books, the parts of two others, as well as cutting out the epistle of James and the book of Revelation from the New Testament.

Luther was eventually persuaded to leave the New Testament alone, but he cut down the Old Testament based on his own views – and that is why Protestant Bibles are incomplete.

Today, Protestants will try to justify this action by a number of different arguments. They will say the books were added by Catholics at the Council of Trent – this is just a flat lie, as you can find if you read the documents of the Council! The Council documents don't give a list of books, but rather say the Bible consists of the books in the Latin Vulgate, a book which was 1000 years old at the time! All Bibles published before the 1500s included all 73 books, and the scenes and stories are referenced in art and literature of the period.

Sometimes Protestants will say the missing books are incorrect because they teach wrong theology – by which they mean they teach theology they don't agree with! This is just supreme arrogance – what gives anyone the right to cut

books out of the Bible because they say something they don't agree with? If we could do that, what meaning does the Bible really have? Why couldn't someone cut the parts out about loving your enemies, for example?

Protestants will also argue that the Rabbis as Jamnia cut the books out – and this is another silly argument. The Jews also cut out the New Testament, so should we cut that too? When deciding what are in the CHRISTIAN scriptures, we don't follow the guidelines of a group which explicitly rejected Christ!

When you defend the presence of these books – and you will have to! - You should focus on the irrefutable evidence that these books were part of ALL Bibles for 1000 years or more. Any argument they are not part of the Bible has to address this, and there is simply no good argument for cutting bits out of the Bible!

Tobit

The book of Tobit is a charming story of perseverance, family love and an education in the actions of angels. This book was probably written around the second century BC, and may have been written in Hebrew or Aramaic – certainly, fragments of this book in these languages have been found among the Dead Sea Scrolls and St Jerome mentions having access to an Aramaic version when he was translating the Latin Vulgate.

So, what is the story about, and what should be learn when reading it? Well, first off, the book is just a really good story – the author has taken a few liberties with historical and geographical details to tell a good story, but that is not key to understanding the book. We meet Tobit, a righteous man living in the city of Nineveh after the deportation of the northern tribes of Assyria around 721 BC. He was exiled for burying those killed by the king Sennacherib, and even after his return when that king dies he continues to perform this work of mercy.

But tragedy befalls him! He is struck with blindness and sinks into despair, embarrassed that his wife has to work to support him. Meanwhile, in faraway Media the beautiful woman Sarah is also despairing – she has been married seven times, but each time on her wedding night before the marriage can be consummated the demon Asmodeus has killed her husbands.

Tobit sends his son, Tobias, to collect a sum of money he has left in the land of Media. Enter the Angel Raphael, in disguise as a kinsman of Tobit, and together they set off for Media.

With the help of Raphael, constantly providing advice and suggestions, Tobias not only marries the girl, but gets rid of the demon, makes his fortune, returns home and cures his father's blindness.

We should read this book with a view to enjoying the story – it is a happy, joyful tale of heroes doing good things. It follows the classic pattern of someone suffering, but coming through in the end through supernatural aid. The spiritual lessons we should take from this book are the value and support of our angels – Tobias has the assistance of Raphael who tradition tells us is an Archangel and we have our Guardian Angels – as well as the lessons of family love and loyalty. In addition, the value of fasting, almsgiving and prayer are also stressed – making this a very appropriate book to read and meditate on during Lent.

Judith

The book of Judith is a story with a strong heroine who uses her feminine charms and courage to save her people. The book tells the story of the daring and beautiful Jewish widow, Judith. At this stage in history, the Jews are under attack from the foreign General Holofernes, and Judith is angry at her people for not trusting in God to deliver them.

She resolves to take matters into her own hands and, after fervently praying, sets off for the camp of Holofernes with her handmaiden, dressed up in her finery and beautiful clothes.

Now, I don't want to spoil the drama of the narrative for you, so I will simply say the story ends with Holofernes and the invaders defeated and the Jews victorious, all through the hands of a single, faithful woman.

The book was probably written in Greek, and many scholars today think of the story as being historically inaccurate – the use of historical and geographical details is inexact and imaginative, and the story can be interpreted as a rousing patriotic call to the Jews. The name Judith simply means “the Jewess” and the purpose of the story appears to be to encourage piety, patriotism and bravery among the Jews – although some Orthodox Jews do regard it as a true reporting of military history leading up to the Maccabean rebellion.

As Catholics, we should read the book of Judith not only for the dramatic, exciting story where God saves His people through a single, faithful woman – as He also does in the book of Esther – but also to teach us the importance of faithfulness to God, and the dangers of hubris and lust. Judith is not a formidable warrior; her weapons are bravery, guile and her feminine wiles, and Holofernes is brought low not only by her skill and determination, but also by his own lustful desires and foolishness. There are lessons for all of us in this book of the Bible, as well as a great story.

Wisdom

The book of Wisdom is one of the two Deuterocanonical books found in the wisdom books, also known as the Wisdom of Solomon. To recap, the Deuterocanonical books are the ones which were part of the Jewish canon used by Christ and the Apostles, but were rejected by the Protestants. Yes, there is a certain delicious irony in the fact that the Protestants reject a book called Wisdom but we won't dwell on that. To learn more about the issue of the Deuterocanon, and to defend these books' inclusion in the Bible, see the earlier episode about them: “Intro to Deuterocanon.”

The book of Wisdom is one of the books which had internal claims to authorship by Solomon, but which scholars have always felt wasn't really written by Solomon. The Muratorian fragment, an exceptionally early canon of Scripture, says that the book was “written by the friends of Solomon in his honor.” It was a common practice, especially with wisdom literature, to ascribe authorship to a famous figure. And, of course, much of the wisdom and good advice in this literature is time-tested knowledge being written down after long oral tradition.

Wisdom reflects a Greek frame of mind and shows Western philosophical concepts and influences. It was likely written in Alexandria by Egypt, the great city of learning and culture founded by Alexander the Great on the north shore of Africa. The date of composition is likely the 1st or 2nd century before Christ, around the same time as the Septuagint was being translated from the Hebrew into the Greek. Alexandria was a conflux of east and west, a melting-pot of ideas and philosophies – and the book of Wisdom reflect this.

As is common with other wisdom books, this text personifies wisdom and shows wisdom as sharing in the divine nature, thus foreshadowing Christ. The late date of composition – perhaps only a century before Christ's birth – allows for a great development of this thought, setting the stage for the acceptance of the Trinity and the Word of God in the mind of the Greek-educated Jews of the world. Remember that it was the Hellenic culture spread by Alexander of Macedon which allowed the Gospels and other early Christian writings to be written in a single language which could be understood widely.

However, Wisdom is not a purely Hellenic book – in fact, it speaks greatly against the pagan practices of the Greek-influenced culture of Egypt, specifically animal worship. The early part of the book describes the uselessness of this

practice, especially when contrasted with the worship of the true God who has promised immortality to those who remain faithful to Him.

The later section of the book is a history of the Jewish people, giving particular emphasis to how they have been saved from the persecutions of the Egyptians, thanks to the guiding hand of wisdom. This history is familiar to Catholics especially when considered in the light of the historical readings from the Easter liturgies which address the great salvations God has brought to his people.

One of the most interesting pieces of the book appears in the third chapter, where the author is the first to express the immortality of the human soul. Catholic apologists should be ready to use this text to defend against the heresy of 'soul sleep' occasioned by the inappropriate use of passages from Ecclesiastes by Protestants.

Another interesting argument can be found in chapter two of Wisdom. Here we find a marvelous prophecy of the Passion of Christ in verses 10 onwards. The text clearly draws heavily from Isaiah, comparing verses 17 and 18 to the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 27 verse 43. Here we find virtually parallel constructions, revealing the persecuting Jewish leaders to be fulfilling this prophecy found in Wisdom.

Sirach

The book of Sirach is also known as the Wisdom of Ben Sira, or Ecclesiasticus. The book is generally named after its author – the Jewish scholar Jesus Ben Sirach – although in the western Church it has commonly been called Ecclesiasticus, which is from the Latinized Greek phrase meaning 'Church book' because it was so commonly read in Churches.

It is very sad that the Protestants and post-Christian Jews reject the book as non-Scriptural. It is part of the Deuterocanon, and so when the topic comes up you must be ready to defend the Deuterocanon's rightful place in the Bible. Just refer to "Intro to Deuterocanon."

The book was originally written in Hebrew in the early 2nd century before Christ. It was translated into Greek in Egypt by the author's grandson – as is made explicit in the first section of the text. One of the most charming things within this section is the translator begging the reader to receive the wisdom with good will, and to be "indulgent" because of potential difficulties in translation between Hebrew and Greek. He specifically says ideas in one language cannot always be precisely expressed in another – an important warning for us all trying to understand the Scriptures!

The original Hebrew text was known to Saint Jerome – who assembled and translated the first Latin text of the Bible, the famous and celebrated Vulgate – but it was the Greek version which was brought into the canon of the Bible, despite Jerome's penchant for Hebrew VERITAS, or Hebrew truth – a belief that the best version of a text was the Jewish one. The Hebrew text was lost for many centuries – an argument Protestants have used to deny inclusion in the canon.

Recently, however – well, recently as far as Biblical scholarship, that is! - Fragments of the Hebrew text have been found. In 1896 portions of a Hebrew text copied in the 11th or 12th century were found in a Cairo synagogue. In the 1950s and 1960s, Hebrew copies were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. Although fragmented and incomplete, these texts show the book was originally written in Hebrew and support the authenticity of the Greek Septuagint text we have today.

Translated into Greek during the persecution of the Jews by the Selucid Empire – a successor state of the Greek Alexander the Great – and their attempt to force Greek pagan religion on the Israelites, the book of Sirach has much in common with the book of Wisdom – even the history of their composition is similar. Ben Sira wrote the book in order to restate traditional Jewish wisdom, trying to counteract the coming pagan influence with the worship of the true God. As

Catholicism is the fulfillment of Judaism with the coming of Christ – whose coming was less than 200 years from the composition of this work, remember – there is much of value in this book for our present time.

We, too, live in a world of persecution by a powerful, pagan empire – and although the persecution may be less physical than it was under the Selucids, it is no-less serious. The restatement of authentic truths is of great value to us – and it is indeed a shame the Protestants have chosen to reject this book.

Baruch

The book of the prophet Baruch. The name Baruch means “blessed”. Baruch was the aide or secretary of the prophet Jeremiah and he lived in the 6th century BC. According to the Jewish historian Josephus – a good source for ancient information – he was an aristocrat and the brother of the King's chamberlain. Accordingly, he was an important, educated and well-connected person.

The traditional dating of the book can be found in the opening passages, which locate the writing of the book shortly after the Chaldaean sack of Jerusalem. The text goes on to describe how Baruch read the book aloud to the Jewish King and nobles in Babylon, and how they were overcome with grief and repentance. A great turning back to God is described, so it is clear that – for some people at least – Baruch's work achieved its intended prophetic purpose.

More modern scholarship has challenged the idea this book was written in the 6th century BC, rather that it was composed before and during the Maccabean period. These opinions neglect to appreciate the very nature of the text – it opens with a description of how the book was read aloud and what happened after it was read. Well, unless Baruch is using his gift of prophecy to foretell what he will do when he has finished writing the work, and how people will react, it is clear the text we have today contains additions from an earlier work.

It is certainly the case that the text of Baruch is not found in the Hebrew Bible, and that it does appear in the Greek Septuagint – suggesting no Hebrew version exists. For this reason, the Jews do not count it as canonical and Martin Luther cut it from the Bible when he produced his flawed translation. As with six other books of the Bible, the book of Baruch is part of the Deuterocanon.

This absence from the scriptures of Protestants and Jews is very sad, because the book is a beautiful expression of Jewish spirituality during the Exile. The picture painted is of grief and penance, but mingled with the hope of the coming Messiah and their fervent devotion to the law. As Christians, we should not make the mistake of focusing on ritualistic observances and adherence to the law, but rather on the spirit of penance and the prophecies and hope that look towards the coming of Christ.

Although Christ has come for us – and for the world – in the little stable in Bethlehem, reading the prophecies about His advent can be wonderful and enjoyable. Also, we must be ready to meet Christ ANEW every time we receive the Eucharist, and a work focusing on repentance, penance and hope is most appropriate as a Eucharistic meditation.

First Maccabees

The first book of Maccabees is so called because it focuses on the Maccabeus family – Judas Maccabeus and his brothers and nephew. The name Maccabeus means “hammer” and was first given to Judas because his attacks were like hammer blows. The rest of his family came to share the name as they fought in the rebellion.

The book takes place about one and a half centuries after the conquests of Alexander the Great, when his empire was fragmented. The Jews are part of the Seleucid Empire, which captures Jerusalem, plunders the sacred objects, sets up an idol in the Temple, and proceeds to forbid circumcision, ownership of the Jewish scriptures and observance of the Jewish laws. The emperor also requires Jews to sacrifice to idols and generally institutes a policy of forced Hellenization, or adoption of Greek culture.

Needless to say, this does not go over well with the Jews! The three sons of Mattathias, the Maccabees of the title, mount a full scale military campaign, and the rebellion is on! The book follows the fortunes of the campaign, detailing the various battles, victories, defeats and political maneuverings.

First Maccabees is a dramatic and historical book – it is widely considered to be very accurate, and a good report of the events that actually took place. The eventual victory of the Jewish people over the Greeks is the foundation of the Jewish festival of Hanukkah, although it is perhaps ironic the Jews don't consider this book to be canonical, although they do consider it historical.

The book is written to emphasize the heroism and bravery of the Jewish warriors, and as an example and education to other Jews. The author admires the heroes of the rebellion for their valor and makes a great deal of uncompromising adherence to Jewish values. As Catholics, it can be difficult for us to understand and appreciate such a Jewish piece of work, but we should try to learn the value of sticking to our own principles and values even in the face of adversity and danger, as well as learning this very important piece of Jewish history. The Maccabean rebellion is a very important pillar in modern Israeli and Jewish identity, and understanding this ancient history can help us understand more modern history and contemporary events.

Second Maccabees

The Second Book of Maccabees. This book was probably written in Alexandria, sometime in the first or second century BC, and was definitely written in Greek. The author claims he is producing a shortened version of a five volume work by Jason of Cyrene, although the original text has not been preserved.

If you've read the first seven chapters of the First Book of Maccabees, you know the story of second Maccabees because it is the same one! It is just a retelling of the same historical period, but this is not primarily a pure history. It is written to edify and often seems more of a sermon than a book. Special emphasis is given to the divine protection the Jews enjoyed, and the book is very important because it shows a number of uniquely and prominently Catholic doctrines.

It was perhaps for this reason that Martin Luther hated this book so much. And, yes, he did hate it – I am not just saying that to make the man look bad. He does that himself when he says he hated the book so much he wished it did not exist!

These uniquely Catholic doctrines are the ones we as Catholics should focus on – although the historical elements are helpful and do in some cases expand and support the history in First Maccabees, the doctrinal teachings are what we should look at.

The passage which is most often quoted by Catholics is chapter 12 verse 38 to the end of the chapter. In here we see clear and explicit teaching concerning prayer for the dead, the idea of offering sacrifice for the dead, and – in general – the doctrine of purgatory itself. The passage is so clear and so explicit it is obvious the author wrote what he wrote JUST to make his doctrinal point, which is very useful to the Catholic apologist when defending the idea of purgatory from hostile Protestants!

But this is not the only passage where an explicitly Catholic doctrine is found. In chapter 15, verses 11 to 16 a vision is recounted, a vision which clearly shows the intercession of the saints on behalf of the people of God. The prophet Jeremiah is explicitly said to pray for the people and the holy city of Jerusalem, which is the straight definition of intercessionary prayer!

But perhaps the most famous passage is the seventh chapter, where the martyrdom of the seven brothers is told. This passage is a sterling example of the bravery of martyrs in the face of death and destruction, and the Church has recognized these Jewish martyrs as saints of the Church with many churches being dedicated to them.

In addition to that, this chapter contains in the ninth verse an explicit teaching of the resurrection of the body, a teaching which is common to most Christian sects, but was not held by all Jews and is rejected by some Christians even today. And in the 28th verse the teaching that God created all things out of nothing, rather than working with pre-existing matter, is of course worth nothing that the creation narrative of Genesis does NOT explicitly say God created all things out of nothing. The narrative picks up when God is moving over the face of the water, so something must exist for Him to move over. We have to go elsewhere in scripture to find support for the doctrine that God created all things out of nothing, and is thus demonstrably superior to and the master of all creation.

Intro to the Gospels

The word comes from Old English, god-spell, meaning “good news”. Long before this word was used to refer to the genre of writing familiar to us, it was used to refer to the good news of Christianity, the message that Jesus Christ died for our sins and rose from the dead. Saint Paul uses the word euangelion in I Corinthians 15:1. This is the original Greek word, meaning “good news”, and is where we get our words evangelist and evangelization.

The earliest record we have of the word Gospel being used to refer to a particular style of writing is around 155 AD, when Justin Martyr uses the word to refer to the memoirs composed by the apostles.

The Gospels, despite appearing at the front of the New Testament, are not the earliest books written. They were written after many of the letters of Saint Paul, with most scholars dating them to the second half of the first century AD. The tradition order of composition is Matthew, Mark, Luke and then John – which is why they are in this order in the Bible – but many modern scholars think Mark was written first, followed by Matthew and Luke. Virtually everyone agrees John was written last.

The purpose of a Gospel is simple – it is to tell the story of Jesus Christ, but with a particular emphasis on the REASON for His Incarnation, Death and Resurrection. The genre does not seek to tell all the events of His life, nor does it seek to provide all the details for the events it does describe. As you read the Gospels, you often find portions of the narrative which are unclear or simply not told. As an example, only two of the Gospels have infancy narratives for Jesus – and each one misses out key parts of the narrative!

Why are the Gospels written like this? Each of the four Gospel writers – who are also known as the Four Evangelists – chose to emphasize a different facet of Jesus Christ, and each was writing for a slightly different audience. When we read the Gospels together with the tradition of the Church, a complete and clear picture of Jesus Christ emerges.

The Gospels are, according to tradition, the work of the men whose name they bear – the Apostles Matthew and John, Saint Luke the companion of Paul, and John-Mark the companion of Peter. The Gospels are, strictly speaking, anonymous – none of them say inside the text who the book was written by. While modern scholars might challenge the authorship of the Gospels, the tradition of the Church is very strong and there is no good reason to discount it.

Each of the Evangelists has a symbol, a winged creature. These four creatures are taken from the Book of Ezekiel and also appear in Revelation. These symbols can be read as showing something of the nature of Christ, as well as teaching Christians about virtues essential for salvation.

The Gospels can be divided into two sections – the synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John. Synoptic means “With The Same Eye” and refers to the close similarity between the first three Gospels. The Gospel of John is very different from the other Gospels in structure and style, and many theories have been advanced to explain these similarities and differences.

You will have noticed that at every Mass the Gospel is read, and particular honor is given to the Gospel reading with the singing of the Alleluia, standing while the Gospel is read, signing oneself with the cross, incense and so forth. All of these behaviors are signs of the reverence given to the Gospel as the means by which Christ's Life, Death and Resurrection are recorded. When you read the Gospels, remember you are reading text which is even more sacred than the rest of Sacred Scripture.

What you might not have noticed is the cycle of readings. The Church uses a three-year cycle for readings, using mostly one of the Synoptic Gospels for a full liturgical year, and switching to another for the next year, and the final one for the third. The Gospel of John is scattered throughout the year, and is most often read on important feast days. As an example, the Passion of Christ according to John is always read on Good Friday, but the Passion account from the current Synoptic Gospel is read on Palm Sunday.

There are four Canonical Gospels, that is, Gospels which the Church recognizes as being inspired and suitable for reading at Mass. There are other books which have the title Gospel, such as the infamous Gospel of Thomas or the Gospel of Judas. The reason these so-called Gospels aren't in the Bible is because they aren't inspired! Books were put in the Bible for three reasons. Firstly, they were written by an apostle or someone who had the authority to tell the eyewitness account of an Apostle. Secondly, they were widely referenced in Christian writings of the time. Thirdly, they were being read at Mass.

The other so-called Gospels didn't have these qualities, and so were not included in the Bible. The Church knew very well that these Gospels contained things which were historically inaccurate and said things about Jesus Christ that simply weren't true. Anyone who tries to claim these books SHOULD be in the Bible, or have some secret insight about Jesus, is ignoring the simple fact these books were rejected by the early Church because what they said just didn't jive with the truth of Christianity.

Matthew

The Gospel According to Matthew is the first book of the New Testament. Like all of the books of the New Testament it is written in Greek, which was the universal language of time. According to tradition, it was the first of the Gospels written, probably around 50 AD. The traditional author is Saint Matthew, also known as Levi the Tax Collector.

Some modern scholars maintain the Gospel of Matthew was written after the Gospel of Mark. In addition, some people believe Matthew's Gospel was written first in Hebrew or Aramaic, and only later-on translated into Greek. These sorts of discussions are very interesting, but they aren't really necessary for an understanding of the Gospel of Matthew.

So, how do we best understand the Gospel of Matthew? Well, there are a number of very important things to remember when you read it. First and foremost, the Gospel of Matthew is a Gospel written to the Jews, and makes a great deal of the connections between the Old and New Testaments. The book itself is divided into five sections or discourses,

modeled after the five books of Moses, and an understanding of Jewish thought and theology is needed to fully appreciate the depth of Matthew's work.

But that doesn't stop us from appreciating the Gospel of Matthew. When you read it, pay careful attention to Jesus Christ as king of the Jews, the New David and the New Moses. Matthew emphasizes the Kingdom of Heaven and is a uniquely Jewish document, designed to teach Jewish converts the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.

Saint Matthew's symbol is a winged human, and his Gospel begins with a detailed genealogy of Christ, placing Him in a very real, historical context so that the audience understands and appreciates He is a real person, with real human roots existing in a definite place and time. This Gospel makes the historical reality of Jesus, very clear, as well as specifically identifying Him as the culmination of the Jewish religion. The human figure also emphasizes Christ's human nature, and tells us we need to use the uniquely human quality of intellectual reason to achieve salvation.

Mark

The Gospel According to Mark is the shortest of the four Gospels. This book was written in Greek very early on in the development of the Gospel tradition, and was authored by John-Mark, a companion of Saint Peter. In many ways, Mark's Gospel represents the teaching of Saint Peter, the First Pope.

As well as representing the viewpoint of Saint Peter, Mark's Gospel is written for a primarily Gentile, Roman audience, and when we read it we should bear this in mind. The Gospel contains phrases and terms a Roman audience would understand, but contains less Jewish elements than other Gospels, especially the Gospel of Matthew. Where they do appear, Jewish references are explained for a Gentile audience. This Gospel was written for the benefit of Romans converting to Christianity, a significant group who were drawn to the preaching of Saint Peter because of his residency and martyrdom in Rome, the capital of the Empire.

Mark's Gospel is the shortest of the Gospels, and is a very concentrated, distilled story, and lacks many of the details we would expect from a biography. It focuses on the most important events of Jesus' Life, His Passion and His Death, and does not contain an infancy narrative. There are also few details of Post-Resurrection appearances of Jesus Christ, and the explanations of Jewish terms make it easy to understand.

A characteristic of Mark's style is Messianic Secrecy – Jesus often tells people not to reveal who He is, or what He has done. Pay attention to this as you read the Gospel, it shows the humility of Jesus and also his desire for faith and trust on the part of his followers as He desires that men believe in Him without visible miracles. This is an important part of Mark's Gospel, and is almost unique to it.

Mark's symbol is the winged lion, which is a symbol not only of royalty and power, but specifically of the Jewish people, the Lion of Judah. This symbol shows that Jesus Christ is Royal, the King of the Jews. There was also a legend that lions slept with their eyes open, foretelling the resurrection of Jesus. Finally, the lion tells Christians they require the virtue of courage to be saved.

Luke

The Gospel According to Luke. Saint Luke was a Christian Gentile, not a Jew by birth, and tradition tells us he was a doctor. He was a companion of Saint Paul on some of his journeys. He wrote excellent Greek, and his Gospel is full of precise historical details which other Gospels lack.

Luke dedicates his Gospel to Theophilus, although it is very likely this was not a real person. Theophilus means “God lover” and this dedication can be understood in the same way as a modern author might write “Dear reader”.

Luke specifically says he is writing a Gospel as others have done, and he is seeking to write an orderly account. It is clear Luke spent a great deal of time in research and study, learning everything he could, before composing his Gospel. It is very likely he was aware of Mark and Matthew's Gospels, and used them when writing his.

Luke's Gospel contains an infancy narrative as well as other details which would have come from Mary. Luke's Gospel is the most Marian of the Gospels, reflecting a strong influence of Our Lady. It is clear Luke spoke with her and received from her details of Jesus' life. This is hardly surprising, as tradition teaches that Luke painted the first icon of Mary, the so-called Black Madonna of Częstochowa.

When we read the Gospel of Luke, the themes we should focus on are the strong sense of the historical. Luke gives us many historical details which set the events most definitely in time, as well as the Marian influence. Another important theme is that of the suffering servant. Luke's symbol is the winged ox, a symbol of service and sacrifice. Remember that oxen were sacrificed on the altar by the High Priest, and so this symbol highlights Jesus' dual role as priest and victim. The ox also signifies the important virtue of humble sacrifice as being necessary for Christian salvation.

Luke's Gospel is the first part of a two part work, with the second being the Acts of the Apostles. When you read the Gospel of Luke you will see similar historical accuracy and detail. Luke's Gospel has perhaps the most familiar style of all four Gospels to modern readers as it contains many historical details and a strong narrative.

John

The Gospel According to John is the most unique of the four Gospels. While the other three Gospels are very similar to each other, this Gospel is very different. It was the last Gospel to be written, being finished around 90 AD or so, and the author of the Gospel is identified as The Beloved Disciple, or the Disciple Whom Jesus Loved.

The Gospel does not specifically identify who this person is, but Catholic tradition identifies him as the Apostle John, the youngest of the Apostles. This is the traditional view, and the view which, in all fairness, has the least problems associated with it. Of course, this has not stopped modern scholars from coming up with alternative theories, and some of these theories are very strange and quite anti-Catholic.

The Gospel presents the narrative of Jesus' life in a different manner and order to the three Synoptic Gospels, and in fact completely misses some episodes in Jesus' ministry. The Gospel contains theologically dense material, and it is in John's Gospel that we find the strongest support for the Eucharist, The Source and Summit of the Catholic Faith.

John's emphasis is on the Divinity of Jesus Christ. Although all the Gospels make it clear Jesus is God, it is John's Gospel which makes this fact most clear and does so explicitly, making it the central theme of the narrative. John is represented by the eagle, a symbol of Christ's Divinity.

The opening of the Gospel of John is famous – In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. Although the Gospel of John does not contain an infancy narrative, it contains something even larger which reveals even more of Jesus Christ.

The Gospel of Matthew reveals the annunciation to Mary and the infancy of Jesus, the Gospel of Luke reveals not only this but also the annunciation and birth of the forerunner of Jesus, John the Baptist. But the Gospel of John takes us

right back to the beginning of time and before the beginning of time, before the creation of the universe. The Gospel of John reveals the eternal nature of Jesus Christ, and His role in the creation of all things.

And it is with THIS understanding we should read the Gospel of John. It is a profound work, even more so than the other Gospels. When you read the Gospel of John, do so slowly and prayerfully, concentrating on the theological truths it contains. Pay particular attention to the Sacramental Truths the book reveals. The Sacraments are the ordinary means of salvation, and the Gospel of John contains some of the clearest information about them in the Bible.

Acts

The book of Acts is the only historical book in the New Testament. Known as the Acts of the Apostles, the book follows on from the Gospels, and comes immediately after them in the traditional New Testament order. Since antiquity, it has been believed Luke wrote Acts, as a sort of 'part 2' to his Gospel. There really are no other candidates for the author of Acts. It opens with an explicit reference to the earlier work, the weight of tradition is behind it, and textual and literary analysis suggests the same author. Acts is in much the same vein as Luke's Gospel, a carefully-researched, excellently-written piece, logically laid out, written for the explicit edification of the Christian community.

Within the New Testament, Acts is a unique piece of work, because it is the only example of a pure history we have. While the Gospels are 'historical' books in the sense they tell a historical story, providing a narrative of what happened, they are focused more on the saving mission of Christ, rather than pure history.

The genre of 'Acts' was a fairly common genre at the time. There were many apocryphal books floating around during the early centuries of the Church which were called 'The Acts of Someone or Other'. The Acts of Peter, the Acts of Pilate and so forth. All of these books were rejected as being unsuitable for reading at Mass, and so didn't get included in the Canon of the Bible. Unlike the Acts of the Apostles they were not historically accurate, or contained false teaching, or were not written by someone with Apostolic Authority.

Although not an Apostle himself, Luke had access to the teaching of the Apostles. Much of Acts is written in the first person, showing that Luke was with Saint Paul on some of his journeys. Luke was also a very careful historian, and he interviewed the Apostles and Our Lady to get accurate information, as he says at the beginning of his Gospel and Acts.

Reading Acts is a wonderful way to learn the early history of the Church, specifically the history involving Peter and Paul, two of the most prominent evangelists the Church had in the first century. The narrative begins with the great commission to spread the Gospel to the ends of the earth, and ends with Paul in Rome, preaching and teaching the faith. The narrative journey is an idealized version of the history of the early Church, and Luke does not make as much of the divisions and problems as Paul does in his letters.

The reason for this is obvious. Luke is writing a history to edify and encourage the Christians, and is covering a huge narrative; several years and thousands of miles of journeys. Paul's letters are written to specific people at specific times to address specific problems and concerns. They are also somewhat private documents, while Acts is public. This accounts for the difference in tone and focus.

When we read Acts, we should be inspired by the zeal of the Evangelists and the certainty they had of the truth of the Christ and the success of their mission. While we can never be Peter or Paul, we can certainly try to emulate them in their tireless devotion. And, of course, like any history of the Church, the book is just a really exciting read, with dramatic and even amusing episodes which will entertain as much as they edify.

The Letters of St. Paul

St. Paul, one of the central figures in early Christianity, is known as the Apostle to the Gentiles because he was one of the most prominent evangelists bringing the Gospel to non-Jews. He founded many churches throughout the Mediterranean and wrote several letters to churches and individuals, advising them on points of doctrine and correcting their errors. Thirteen of these letters are part of the New Testament; although it is generally accepted Paul wrote other letters too.

His letters are sometimes called Epistles, a word which means letters, although which can have a different meaning. A letter is a communication sent to a particular person or group, and is generally speaking private. When the term is used to refer to ancient writing, an Epistle is a document written in the form of a letter, but is intended for public consumption. There is some debate over whether or not the letters of Paul are Letters, or Epistles, or some combination of both. We can use the words virtually interchangeably.

Saint Paul is such a central figure to early Christianity and his letters of such importance to the Scriptures and Christian thought that he deserves his own analysis, independent of the letters he wrote. He was a well-educated man, from the city of Tarsus in modern Turkey. This city was well-known for intellectualism and education, and Paul was well-versed in Greek traditions and philosophy as well as Jewish religion and culture. He was a trusted deputy of the Jewish Temple Chief Priest, and was responsible for much of the persecution of the early Christians.

In the book of Acts, we read about the death of the first martyr, Saint Stephen. The narrative tells us that the men responsible for the stoning of Saint Stephen laid their coats at the feet of Paul. This tells us that Paul was the instigator of this murder, as he was of many other Christians. Following Saint Paul's famous conversion on the road to Damascus, he travels to that city and is baptized and healed of the blindness God struck him with. His former opposition to Christianity is made clear by the nervousness of the Christians of Damascus in meeting with him as they are convinced he is a danger to them.

For the rest of his life, Saint Paul worked tirelessly to promote the Gospel. He undertook three great missionary journeys, preaching to many Jews and Gentiles alike through the Roman world. During his journeys, he also wrote the famous letters of Saint Paul. These letters appear in the New Testament in descending order of length, but they were not written in that order, something which can cause confusion if we are not aware of it.

Towards the end of his life Saint Paul was arrested and spent time in jail, writing a number of epistles in captivity. He traveled to Rome to have his case heard before the court there, and spent two years under house arrest in the capital of the Empire. He was executed by beheading around 64 AD, a martyr of the Christian faith. Because of his writing and the method of his death, he is usually shown in statues and icons with a sword and a book.

We can learn a great deal about Saint Paul from his letters and also the book of Acts, in which he is a central character. He is an intense personality; he was fiercely devoted to the Jewish religion and loved God passionately, and turned all that energy and devotion towards crushing the upstart new sect he saw as being a threat to Judaism. However, following his conversion on the road to Damascus he, quite literally, sees the light and becomes Christian. Paul claimed to have received the Gospel directly from Jesus Christ, and it is clear a passion and love for the person of Jesus Himself was what drove him on his missionary journeys for the rest of his life.

When we look at the figure of Saint Paul, we see why Jesus Christ chose him to be The Apostle to the Gentiles. He was a figure existing in two worlds; an educated Jewish man familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures, the Temple and Jewish worship, but also a man well-versed in Greek philosophy and culture. The Bible tells us he was a Roman citizen,

something he used to his political and legal advantage. He possessed two names – Paul is a Hellenic name, used when he was dealing with the Gentiles. His Jewish name was Saul.

This knowledge of two cultures and his intensity made him a most useful Evangelist for Jesus. Throughout the Gospels, we see several incidents where Jesus makes it clear He has come for the house of Israel, not the Gentiles. He leaves the evangelization of the world for the Church He founds – the Great Commission given by Jesus before He ascends into Heaven is to preach the Gospel to the whole world.

Saint Paul is one of the first and most prominent people to do just that. His pattern, as revealed in Acts, when entering a new city is to preach the good news of Jesus Christ in the synagogue and then, if the Jews do not accept Jesus, to go into the town square or other public place and preach to the Gentiles. Saint Paul, a man living in two worlds, patterns his efforts after both what Jesus did and what Jesus told us to do.

But, it is Paul's letters we are most aware of; we hear an excerpt from them at virtually every Sunday Mass and they are frequently quoted-from in apologetics and catechesis. A word of warning when reading them; Saint Paul wrote letters to specific Churches and people at specific times about specific things. Most of Paul's letters are him correcting the Christians in these Churches, dealing with a mistake they have made, explaining a point of doctrine or giving them advice. Many of these letters are very harsh and direct; Paul does not mince words and he writes to explain confusing issues. However, when we read his letters we should take care not to treat them as solutions in search of a problem, and should not attempt to over-apply the wisdom they contain to our own lives. The instructions in the letters are not necessarily universal instructions for the whole Church at all times and in all places.

Remember, there is no valid interpretation of the Scriptures outside that of the tradition of the Church, and so the letters of Paul are not a matter of private interpretation. In fact, Saint Peter tells us EXPLICITLY in his second letter, chapter 3 verses 15 and 16, that ignorant and unstable people twist the words of Saint Paul into their own interpretations which lead to destruction. This, of course, is what many of the Protestant communities do – they take Paul out of context and come up with all kinds of strange theories. By all means, read the letters of Saint Paul, but have a care when deciding what they mean!

Romans

The letter to the Church at Rome is Saint Paul's longest letter. It was most likely written while Paul was in Corinth and for a number of different reasons. Firstly, Paul sought to introduce himself to the Church at Rome, whom he had never visited, and secondly to encourage their financial support for a planned evangelistic mission to Spain. At this point in Paul's ministry, he had journeyed around the eastern Mediterranean and established many churches and he desired to go even further. He hoped that the Church in Rome, en-route to Spain, would be able to provide him with the resources to take the Gospel further.

But in addition to these practical matters, Paul also outlines the Gospel very clearly, with a definite emphasis on the relationship of the Law to the saving power of the Cross. In this respect, this letter is very similar to Galatians, although it is milder in tone and much less angry. Like Galatians, however, Romans emphasizes the power of faith to save and shows that adherence to the Jewish Law cannot save.

Romans occupies a point of great importance in the theology of certain Protestant sects, and the Catholic apologist must be ready to defend it. Martin Luther felt this letter was of great importance, with some of his words appearing to place it above the Gospels in certain ways. He interpreted the letter as teaching salvation through faith alone and not works. Here St. Paul was saying that **works of the Mosaic Law** do not save. So certain were he of this view, that in chapter 3

verse 28, he actually ADDED the word “alone” to the text, so it read “man is justified by faith (alone) apart from works of the law”.

Of course, this word was not in the original Greek text and Luther admitted as such, claiming that he willed it to be there and that his will was reason enough. He then went on to say that if any Papist were to complain then Papists and asses are one and the same thing. Most scholars view this as a poor reason to add words to scripture.

The letter of James contains clear teaching concerning salvation by faith alone. In fact, the ONLY time the phrase Faith Alone appears in the Bible is in the letter of Saint James, saying “man is saved by works and NOT by faith alone”. It is for this reason Luther hated the epistle of James and wanted to cut it out of the Bible.

The Church at Rome was a mixed group of Jewish and Gentile Christians, and the teaching contained in Romans is clearly directed to such a group, focusing as it does on the correct position of the Jewish Law in salvation. It does not upbraid the Romans for adherence to the Jewish Law in the same way as Galatians does, although it makes the theological point of the New Covenant fulfilling the Old more clearly and explicitly. A Catholic apologist wishing to explain the relationship of the two Covenants should be well-versed in the text of Romans.

Perhaps one of the most beautiful and heartfelt portions of the epistle to the Romans is chapters 9 to 11, where Paul expressed great sadness his people – the Jews – have rejected Christ and do not accept Him as messiah. He even says he would be cut off from Jesus Himself if his people would just accept Christ – a truly noble gesture, even if futile. Throughout these chapters, Paul explains the fulfillment of the Old Covenant in the New, and concludes by advising Gentile Christians not to lord it over Jewish Christians through the metaphor of the olive tree.

First Corinthians

Saint Paul's First Letter to the Church at Corinth. Christians are familiar with this letter, as it contains some of the best known lines of Pauline scripture in the entire Bible, including the famous discussion of the virtue of charity at the beginning of chapter 13. Scholars are generally agreed this letter was written while Paul was at Ephesus, although there is disagreement whether this was during his first or second visit there.

First Corinthians is a large letter and is directed at a turbulent and active Christian community who were struggling with many difficulties. Corinth was a port city in Greece located on a narrow land bridge. Because of the geography of Greece a common practice was to avoid the long sea journey around the Peloponnese peninsula by making landfall on one side of this land bridge and having the ship dragged by slaves the short distance to the other side. In modern times, a canal has been built at Corinth to make this even easier.

This meant Corinth was a major crossroads for all kinds of sailors, merchants and pilgrims. It was a port city with everything that implied; it had a reputation for licentiousness and excess, and there were many different pagan cultures and religions competing for converts. The church at Corinth suffered because of these influences and much of Paul's First letter is taken up with upbraiding and correcting the Corinthians for all kinds of immorality and sexual excess. Because of this, the First letter to the Corinthians provides a wide ranging moral guide which is very useful to modern Christians, living in a secular world every bit as evil and depraved as the city of Corinth.

In addition to the focus on upbraiding the Corinthians for their immorality and a series of moral lessons, Saint Paul emphasizes the independent value of each and every Christian in this letter. Chapter 12 contains the clearest example of this teaching when he exhorts the Corinthians to use their gifts together to build up the body of Christ, and for them to recognize all Christians have a valuable and essential role in the Church even though their individual gifts may appear

weak. It is in this chapter Paul uses the analogy of the organs of the body, and the teaching of the Church as the literal body of Christ is made plain.

Paul also writes specifically about the misuse of the gift of tongues, and knowledge of the content of chapter 14 is vital for any Catholic apologist dealing with a Christian community who makes excessive use of such things. Paul can appear to hold speaking in tongues in a low regard, although it must be remembered his words were written specifically to the Corinthian church, and so reflect his views on their excessive reliance on this rather dramatic spiritual gift, a misuse which was likely caused by the influence of pagan cults in the city surrounding them.

One of the most interesting, and yet unimportant, things about First Corinthians is the fact it is NOT the first letter Saint Paul wrote to the Church at Corinth! In chapter 5, verse 9, Paul writes that he has “written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people” - showing there was a letter PREVIOUS to what we call First Corinthians.

This is certainly interesting and we may wonder what might be contained in that letter, but it is ultimately unimportant. It is unimportant because the scriptures contained in the Bible were chosen by the Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to be read aloud at Mass, NOT to be the “be all and end all” of Christian teaching. All the information necessary for salvation is contained in the Deposit of Faith, SOME of which is contained in the Scriptures and the rest in the Oral Tradition of the Church. There is no danger some vital information concerning our salvation or Jesus Christ is contained in Paul's lost letter to the Corinthians; the Holy Spirit has ensured we have everything we need for our salvation.

Paul's previous letter to the Corinthians is lost to us. It was not preserved, and the early Church does not quote from it or refer to-it in its letters and sermons. We cannot speculate why this might be, except to state we know it should not be in the Bible because it is NOT IN the Bible, and the Bible was assembled by Christ's Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit!

Second Corinthians

Saint Paul's Second Letter to the Church at Corinth was written at Ephesus. This is most likely the fourth letter Paul wrote to the Church at Corinth. When we talked about Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, we noted that there was most likely a letter prior to that which has not been preserved. A similar situation exists with Second Corinthians, because Paul describes a Letter of Tears he wrote in Second Corinthians chapter 2 verses 3 and 4, and chapter 7 verse 8.

First Corinthians doesn't fit this description, so most scholars consider this severe letter to be the third letter Paul wrote to Corinth and what we know as Second Corinthians to be the fourth letter. Some scholars, however, think that chapters 10 to 13 of Second Corinthians to be a surviving part of this severe letter which was tacked on to the end of the latter. This is not, however, a widely accepted viewpoint.

As was mentioned when we talked about First Corinthians, there is no fear we might miss something because of these missing letters – the Holy Spirit ensures we have everything we need for our salvation in the teaching of the Church.

Second Corinthians is a shorter letter than the first and is regarded as showing a great deal of the apostle's personality. The later chapters are quite bitter and reproachful, angry at the Corinthians for challenging his authority as an apostle, and much of the letter is defending his actions in the face of these attacks. Without an awareness of the particular social and religious pressures in the city of Corinth and the church there, this letter can be very hard to understand. The Catholic studying scripture should read this letter in conjunction with First Corinthians, and understand Paul was defending himself from unfair accusations and attacks.

Galatians

Saint Paul's Letter to the Church at Galatia. Galatia is not a city, but rather a province in central Anatolia, which is modern day Turkey, and Paul wrote an urgent letter to them addressing a number of problems in the Churches there. There is some disagreement over when and where this letter was written, with some scholars considering this to be the earliest of the Epistles. However, most scholars agree it was written later, either at Ephesus or Corinth.

The letter is a clear rebuke to the Galatians. A burning problem in the early Church was the attitude to Judaism, and the Christians of Galatia had become convinced they had to adhere to the Mosaic Law in order to be saved. This letter is Paul's answer, and it is a very clear refutation of the notion a Christian should keep the Mosaic Law.

Using rabbinic arguments which would appeal to Jews, Paul makes it very clear the Cross and faith set aside the Law, saying that Law only brings a curse. In this epistle, Paul states a man is not saved through works but by faith. Some Protestants interpret this to mean ALL works, but the correct understanding – as revealed by a reading these verses in context and also in light of the letter of Saint James – is that it is works of the MOSAIC LAW which cannot save, not works of charity performed in union with Christ. The Catholic apologist will need to be well-versed in what the epistle to the Galatians actually does say when dealing with sola fides Protestants.

There are some very interesting things to note in this letter. First is the incident at Antioch where Paul upbraids Peter for not eating with Gentiles. Protestants sometimes use this as an argument that the Pope cannot be infallible, but it is not a good argument. Peter KNEW what he should do and never taught against it, but he just didn't do it! This was a case of not walking the talk, which is not the same thing as being fallible.

Secondly, the harsh tone of the letter should be noted. Paul really does not mince words here, and really attacks the Galatians, calling them “stupid people”. But Paul is doing this in love, and this is an important thing for modern Christians faced with accusations of uncharitable behavior to understand. It is not uncharitable to correct a fellow Christian in love, or – as Saint Paul says in Second Thessalonians – to correct him a brother.

Finally, Paul uses the beautiful metaphor of the two sons of Abraham to show we become sons of God NOT through physical descent from Abraham, but rather by faith and the promise of Abraham. This is the earliest and clearest declaration of the position of the Gentiles within salvation history, and is not only a beautiful piece of writing, but is also vital for us as Gentile Christians brought into the fold of Christ by the mission of the Church.

Ephesians

Ephesians is the first of the so-called “captivity epistles” - letters written by Saint Paul while he was in chains. Scholars believe these letters were written by Paul during his imprisonment in Rome which is mentioned in the book of Acts, and so the date of composition would be in the early to mid-60s AD – about thirty years after the death of Christ.

This particular epistle, Saint Paul's letter to the Church at Ephesus, is considered by some scholars to be pseudographical, and is called deutero-Pauline, meaning secondary of Paul. These scholars think this letter was written in the style of Paul, following his theology and ideas, but wasn't actually written by Paul himself. Of course, ancient sources maintain the letter was written by Paul and we must always be careful to distinguish between the MODERN idea of authorship and the ancient understanding.

Ephesians follows many of the same themes as the letter to the Colossians. In fact it uses many of the same words and phrases. It concentrates on the position of Christ within the spiritual and cosmological realm; there was controversy

over the role of spirits, cosmic forces and angels in the early Church, and so Paul sets the record straight with this letter and the one to the Colossians.

This was a particularly important message to teach to the Church at Ephesus, because there was a famous pagan temple dedicated to the goddess Artemis at Ephesus. This was a major worship site for a very important pagan goddess, and so Christianity and paganism clashed in this city. When Paul visited the city, he argued with the artisans who made silver statues of the goddess, urging them to stop their pagan idolatry – we read about this in chapter 19 of Acts. This conflict between Christianity and pagan worship sets the stage for the content of this letter.

Paul declares Christ's supreme position over all cosmic forces as the central principle which makes sense of all creation. But in addition to this, he also makes it clear that Christ has brought all men together and he presents the theology of the New Man in Christ, as well as making it clear there are no divisions between the various people who now make up the Church. In this regard, this letter shares themes with Romans and Galatians.

In addition, this letter contains passages telling Christians how to behave – the advice is (hopefully!) familiar to us as he tells us to avoid sexual immorality, anger, bitterness and all sorts of bad behavior. But Paul also emphasizes the role of the family and the correct behavior for husbands, wives, parents and children. This advice is gentler than that found in many other letters, and in many ways this letter reads more like an open letter or lecture than a specifically targeted communication.

Finally, the sixth chapter of Ephesians contains the “armor of God” passage. In this, Saint Paul exhorts us to engage in the spiritual battle against sinfulness and wickedness. He couches this in military terms and also with the entire cosmological hierarchy he has shown Jesus to be supreme to.

Philippians

The second of the captivity epistles, Saint Paul's Letter to the Church at Philippi. This is a short letter, and is a joyful expression of Christian love. It contains many personal greetings from the Apostle to the people at Philippi. This shows Paul's closeness to the city, the only Church from whom Paul would accept gifts.

The central theological theme of this letter is Christology, and in the second chapter Paul quotes from a Christian hymn. This is the so-called kenosis passage, where Paul writes that Christ “emptied Himself”. There is a great deal of discussion of exactly what this means. It is a central concept of the Incarnation; how can the infinite God become man? If God is all-powerful and Jesus is God, yet there are places in the Gospels where Jesus' power seems to be limited, how can we understand this? Kenosis is the means by which theologians attempt to understand it, although be warned that trying to understand how God can become man is harder than trying to fit Niagara Falls into a gallon jug! These are advanced and quite complicated ideas, so don't worry if you find them confusing or difficult. When we read Scripture, we should read it prayerfully and with a desire to get what we can get out of it, rather than feeling inadequate if we cannot get everything. No human mind can comprehend the full beauty of the Scriptures!

An easier aspect of Philippians to focus on is its emphasis on Christian love and the frequent personal touches and references. These emphasize not only the central theme of Paul's mission – to spread the love of Christ – but also ground this letter and Paul's work in reality. He mentions people, places and events which are unconnected with the wider theology he discusses, and these reveal not only historical facts but also the personal relationships the Apostle had.

And speaking of historical facts! Something should be said about the city of Philippi itself. It was founded and named after Philip the Second of Macedon, a man of great military power and skill who was overshadowed by his more famous son, Alexander the Great – yes, THAT Alexander.

The city survived into the Roman era, where it became something of a retirement home for veteran soldiers. When we read the epistle, we should do so in light of this information – the people hearing it were mature, disciplined individuals with an awareness of the value of human life. They were what we might call worldly-wise people. It was in this city that Paul first preached in Europe, and the story of his coming to Philippi can be found in the 16th chapter of the book of Acts.

Colossians

The epistle to the Colossians is the third of the captivity epistles. The captivity epistles were written while Paul was in chains, and he makes frequent reference to the fact he is imprisoned, highlighting the fact he rejoices in being persecuted and punished for the faith.

While reading Colossians we will immediately notice its similarity to the epistle to the Ephesians – the letter deals with many of the same themes and even uses some of the same phrases. The reason for this is obvious if we study the history of the Church at Colossae; the worshipers there had mixed pagan practices into their Christianity and Paul was concerned about this. Much like in the city of Ephesus with its famous temple to the pagan moon goddess Artemis, Christian belief was being polluted by pagan practices in Colossae, so Paul wrote to correct their errors.

He emphasizes Christ's supreme position over creation, not denying the existence of other supernatural forces but making it clear Christians should not worship them; because if Christ is supreme, why would we worship anything else? In addition to having similar themes to Ephesians, many of the doctrines of the Church as Christ's body found in Romans are repeated in this letter.

This repetition, along with the emphasis on Christ's supreme divinity, has caused some modern scholars to cast doubt on the Pauline authorship of this epistle. A word must be said about this.

Firstly, any doubt about Paul having written this epistle is very recent indeed – there is a consensus among early theologians and Church Fathers that the letter was written by Paul. The objections to Paul having written it are very scholarly and intelligent, but they are certainly not conclusive or final – at best, they raise questions which can be fairly easily answered. When the issue of Paul writing similar letters – essentially, repeating himself – is raised, we must remember that there were similar problems in different Churches scattered around the Mediterranean. Rather than just send these Churches an identical copy of a letter he had already written – which would be impersonal and might not fully address their concerns – Paul chooses to compose an original letter, albeit one which draws on similar sources to previous letters. At this stage in history, there was not a definitive canon of the Bible and so Christians in scattered Churches did not all have access to the same scriptures.

Finally, the notion that 'holding Christ up as supreme and fully divine, suggests that this letter is a later work', is a very modern, liberal notion based on the division of so-called high and low Christology. The theory falsely states that the understanding of Christ as divine only happened long after His death; prior to that, no-one thought Jesus was God. The first three Gospels do not explicitly state Jesus is God, while the fourth Gospel does. This is held up as evidence that the early Christians did not believe Jesus was God, and this was something added later. If this was something added later, then letters of Paul which make it clear Christ is divine are later forgeries.

Unfortunately for the proponents of this theory, it is a load of tosh. While the first Gospels don't **explicitly** state that Jesus is God, they make it **very clear** that Jesus is God. Many times in the Gospels Christ does things – such as forgive sins – which only God can do. It is true He does not flat-out state He is God, but this is arguably part of the Messianic Secret and a desire to encourage people to come to Him rather than forcing them to accept Him. Similarly, the letters of Paul all make it clear Jesus Christ is God – although they might not do so blatantly obviously.

Ultimately, any attempt to use high and low Christology to argue that the early Christians did not think Jesus is God is just a modern, liberal attempt to deny the divinity of Christ. It is a very poor argument indeed, and serious scholars give it very little credence. There might be questions about the authorship of Colossians, but any argument based on the assumption early Christians did not think Jesus is divine can be safely disregarded.

First Thessalonians

Saint Paul's First Letter to the Church at Thessalonica is very probably the earliest epistle he wrote which we have in the Bible. I like to refer to Saint Paul's epistles in this way – Saint Paul's Letter to the Church at Thessalonica – rather than the shortened form of Thessalonians. This is because Paul is writing to a Christian community – a Church – located in a particular city. He is not writing to the city as a whole, and we should always remember this; Paul is writing to people who are ALREADY Christians, correcting them, educating them, teaching them, supporting them.

Most scholars agree that First Thessalonians was written in the early 50s, very probably while Paul was in Corinth during his first missionary journey. He spent a year and half in Corinth, and wrote two letters to the Church at Thessalonica there.

Paul's main concern with the Church at Thessalonica appears to be the newness of the Church, and he sent his delegate Timothy to visit them and make a report. He is pleased with the report, however, and the majority of the letter is an affection praise of them and their faith. He does not spend as much time in this letter correcting flaws or explaining doctrine as he does in other letters, although he does address a very important point the young Church was worried about.

The Christians in Thessalonica were concerned that those who had already died would not enjoy eternal life; they believed that only those who were alive at the Second Coming of Christ would enter Heaven. Such beliefs were common in the early Church – many of the first Christians, perhaps including Paul himself, felt the coming of Christ was imminent, within the lifetimes of those who had known Him during the Galilean ministry.

In First Thessalonians, Paul not only gives the Church at Thessalonica guidelines on how Christians should behave, but also gives important information concerning the resurrection of the dead at the end of the world. These verses – chapter 4, verses 13-17 – are today grossly misinterpreted by many Protestants into the so-called Rapture doctrine. This, of course, is exactly what Saint Peter warns the ignorant and unstable will do with Paul's writings!

First Thessalonians is a nice introduction to Paul's epistles, and is very short indeed. The guidelines of how Christians should behave, and the model given by Paul as he reminds them of how he behaved when he was in Thessalonica, are excellent maxims for all Christians to live by. The teachings about the end of the world should be read by all Catholics so they know how to challenge the evil and pernicious misinterpretations put about by certain Protestants.

Second Thessalonians

Saint Paul's Second Letter to the Church at Thessalonica. The traditional view, and one which has much support, is that it was written shortly after First Thessalonians while Paul was still in Corinth. The letter is less personal and intimate than the first, although it deals with many of the same themes. Like First Thessalonians much of it deals with the end times.

The second chapter contains a clarification of Paul's first letter; the people of Thessalonica were being thrown into confusion and excitement by the notion that the coming of Christ was very imminent indeed, and Paul seeks to curb their enthusiasm, explaining more about how the end times will unfold. Paul lays out a number of signs and events which will take place before the second coming of Christ, so as to reassure the Thessalonians and stop them panicking.

In addition, Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to always be ready for the coming of Jesus, and these two themes are very important and relevant for us today. Thessalonians is often misinterpreted by Protestant groups and used to spin a completely erroneous understanding of the end times. A solid grounding in the Church's teaching and how to defend it is essential for the Catholic apologist, and a careful reading of the two letters to the Church at Thessalonica is the place to start.

Second Thessalonians closes with Paul reminding them not to be lazy or feckless – it contains the famous line that he who refuses to work should not eat, a clear declaration against idleness and lack of discipline. Of course, this advice should not be interpreted divorced from the notion of charity towards the poor and less fortunate – notice that Paul says those who REFUSE to work, not those who cannot. Similarly, Paul's urging people to mind their own business does not mean we should not correct those who are wrong or spiritually lazy – in fact, Paul goes on to specifically say we should correct those who are disobedient to the Gospel and not treat them as enemies.

Second Thessalonians is very much a continuation of First Thessalonians, and the two letters should be read together and viewed in much the same way.

First Timothy

First Timothy is the first of the so-called Pastoral Epistles. These letters were written by Saint Paul to fellow bishops who were concerned with how to lead a community of Christian believers.

Timothy was a companion of Paul, and was consecrated bishop of Ephesus by Paul around 65 AD. According to tradition, he was martyred in the later years of the first century AD by an angry crowd of pagans. Timothy was trying to prevent a procession of idols, pagan celebrations and songs, and the people in this “pagan pride parade” attacked and beat him to death.

This letter is concerned almost exclusively with how the Church should be governed – the roles of bishop and deacon are discussed, and there are many warnings against false teachings. The very specific language used in this letter has been used by those challenging the Church's teaching on priestly celibacy, and it is important to remember there is no correct interpretation of Scripture outside the teaching of the Church.

Some scholars maintain that the Pastoral Epistles, including this letter, were not written by Paul. But this is not the historical view, and the objections raised to Pauline authorship are fairly weak. It is important to remember that Paul was writing towards the end of his life, and was writing to faithful Christians. These two factors may account for the relative timidity of the Pastoral Epistles. These are not designed to shake up faltering Christians, but to support and nurture the successors Paul knows he will be leaving behind as his martyrdom approaches.

First Timothy is an excellent guide to pastoral care, and the frequent exhortations to be faithful and brave are ones which any person with a ministry in the Church would do well to heed. But don't think the advice just applies to priests. Laypeople might not need to make choices about who is a bishop or how to run a parish, but we can certainly apply the principles in this letter to our own lives, especially within the domestic Church that the vast majority of us find ourselves in. Husbands and fathers! You are, in a very real sense, the bishop of your domestic Church – heed the words of Saint Paul and treat your family as Christ treats the Church; love them, protect them and guide them to greater holiness!

Second Timothy

The Second Letter to Timothy is the last pastoral epistle and the last epistle Paul wrote in the Bible. It is obviously written to the same person as the First Epistle; Timothy the bishop of Ephesus. It is an intensely personal letter, written by Paul when he was very well aware of his impending death. Paul is looking back on his life, offering sage advice to Timothy and urging him to remember what he has been taught and to keep the faith.

This very personal touch can make this letter difficult to read – it is terribly intimate, and anyone who has sat with a relative near the end of his life and been given advice will be familiar with the style. Paul is passing the torch to the next generation, and he desperately wants to make sure Timothy knows how he should conduct his life and ministry.

But the letter is not maudlin or morose – on the contrary, it is filled with joyful certainty that he will soon be with God. And this is what we should take from this letter – we should read it to see how to conduct ourselves, but also as an example of how we should face our inevitable death. Paul has run the race to the finish and is assured of the victor's crown – and he is now urging others to follow in his footsteps. Read this letter, and try to apply its wisdom to your own life.

Titus

The Epistle to Titus is the second pastoral epistle. Titus does not appear in the book of Acts and we know little about him. However, from the letter written to him it is clear Paul left him in charge of the Church on the island of Crete. This letter was written to him at about the same time as the First Letter to Timothy and for much the same purpose – to encourage him in the faith and to offer guidance on how to choose leaders for the Church. The letter is less personal than the one to Timothy, but the central theme, message and purpose are the same.

There are couple of things which are particularly interesting about this letter – the first is the inclusion of warnings against Judaisers – those who placed too great an emphasis on Jewish observance and customs. In this, the letter can be related to Galatians and Romans, and it is often good to read those epistles alongside Titus. It is very likely Titus was aware of Paul's views on such things, and so this is why he does not include the full details in his letter.

Within the warning about the Judaisers is the second interesting tidbit – Paul quotes a Cretan prophet, thought by most scholars to be Epimenides of Knossos, who says that all Cretans are liars, lazy and gluttons. Obviously, this is both impolite and a gross generalization – but Paul goes on to say this is a true statement!

If all Cretans are always liars, and the person saying this is a Cretan, then that must be a lie – which means that not all Cretans are liars – hence the paradox. It must be said that this is not a true liar's paradox, but it is interesting to find Paul using it. The apostle is too clever to not realize this is some kind of paradox, and so we are left wondering if he is making a joke, and ironical statement, or something else.

The letter to Titus should be read in the same way we read the first letter to Timothy – as a guide for good living and an encouragement in the faith. It is so very similar in many ways it is good to compare and contrast the two, seeing how Paul offered the same advice to two bishops far apart – which shows the importance of consistent teaching and tradition in the early Church.

Philemon

Saint Paul's letter to Philemon is the last of the captivity epistles. This is a very short letter written to a person, rather than a parish community, and this gives it a very different character. Philemon was a Christian and a slave-owner, because Paul writes to him as a “fellow worker” about a slave called Onesimus. We know Philemon is wealthy, because he has a Church which meets at his house – and although Paul addresses the letter to this Church, the content of the letter is very personal to Philemon.

The short letter is a delightful expression of Christian love and humanity, urging Philemon to treat the former slave Onesimus as a brother in Christ, rather than a slave and servant. But beyond this, there is confusion about the letter – it is very personal, and so can be difficult for us to understand. Does Paul expect Philemon to merely forgive Onesimus for running away, or does he expect him to free him from slavery? Precisely what has transpired, and what is Paul's view of slavery? The difficulty in understanding this letter is clear when we learn that BOTH sides of the slavery debate during abolition quoted from this epistle and used it as support.

The characters of Philemon and Onesimus are interesting characters. But, a particularly interesting thing is that some Biblical scholars feel Onesimus should be identified as the bishop of Ephesus in the second century AD, and that he was the first to compile together the letters of Paul as part of the Bible. Accordingly, he included this very personal letter along with the letters to Churches and more significant Christians because it was of such profound importance to him.

Regardless of this, it is clear the epistle of Philemon is of great value to Christians – when you read it, do not try to come to a firm conclusion on the precise historical events which surrounded it. These are things we can never know this side of Heaven, and we don't really need to know them. Rather, focus on the great love and compassion Paul shows, and the theme of grace and love, of ceasing to be slaves and becoming brothers. You might like to meditate on this letter alongside the 15th verse of the 15th chapter of the Gospel of John.

Read this letter, and see the love Paul pours out here. He behaves in a manner quite like the Good Samaritan in the parable, offering to pay Onesimus' debts, and urges Philemon to show love and mercy and compassion. This side of Paul is one which is clear in his letters, but never more so than here, but is sadly often glossed over by many readers of the Bible.

Intro to Catholic Epistles

An introduction and overview of the Catholic Epistles, also known as the General Epistles. These books of the Bible are – like the letters of Saint Paul – epistles. However, they are not written to specific persons or geographical churches, as the letters of Paul are – rather, they are written to the Christian people in general. Hence the name, General Epistles or Catholic Epistles – using the word “Catholic” to refer to universal rather than the Roman Catholic faith. Remember; when these epistles were written there was ONLY the Catholic Church – meaning universal Church – and the word Catholic was ONLY used to refer to every Christian, not merely those who have kept all of Christ's commands.

There is a difference between a letter and an epistle, despite the fact the words are used almost interchangeably. A letter is a private communication between two people, and is generally not intended for universal consumption. An

epistle – when used to refer to ancient writings such as the Bible – is a document written in the form of a letter which is intended to have a more general audience. While there is debate over whether the letters of Paul should be called epistles, or letters, or a combination of both, it is certainly the case that the Catholic Epistles are much closer to true epistles.

This provides us with the foundation for reading and studying them because the letters are more general, written to the Church as a whole rather than specific communities or persons, at specific times, and addressing specific concerns. Their content can be more broadly applied. In the letters of Paul there are contradictions – because Paul is writing to different communities who have different needs and issues about different problems; hence he provides different solutions. The letters of Paul are very vulnerable to misunderstanding and can be twisted into saying things against the faith – something which Saint Peter EXPLICITLY warns about in one of his general letters!

Virtually all Catholics have experienced a Protestant or confused or rebellious Catholic taking verses from the Bible out of context and using them to “prove” some false position. Obviously, it is important to remember that scripture cannot be interpreted outside of the teaching of the Church who created it. However, the Catholic Epistles – while not immune to this sort of twisting and misrepresentation – are easier to apply to the faith as a general rule.

Hebrews

The Epistle to the Hebrews. Traditionally, this has been called Saint Paul's Letter (or Epistle) to the Hebrews, and is found in the Bible at the end of the letters of Saint Paul. It has been said – only half-jokingly – that it is not by Paul, not an epistle, and not to the Hebrews! This isn't really a fair criticism, although there are elements of truth to all three claims.

There has always been discussion about Hebrews' authorship and now it is generally accepted that Saint Paul did not write this letter. Even when we look at the canon of the Bible itself – specifically the ORDER of the books – we see hints of the authorship being questioned. Hebrews appears at the end of the letters of Saint Paul, even though the letters are placed in descending order of length.

One of the evidences presented for the author not being Paul is a difference in style from his other letters – the Greek used is quite different in many ways. It is felt, because of a concluding reference to Timothy as a companion, that the author was close to or a companion of Paul – and some authorities feel the author might have been Saint Luke. Others have advanced the position that Pope Clement might have written it. No-one is entirely sure.

However, whoever wrote the letter to the Hebrews there is little serious doubt about the date of composition, which is fairly early for a New Testament work. The references to and familiarity with Jewish temple worship places the composition prior to 70AD and the destruction of the Temple by Titus and the Tenth Legion. The fact there is no reference to the Eucharistic rites suggest a very early date indeed.

Hebrews is felt by many to have not been written originally as a letter – rather a sermon or homily – and only after the fact modified to include the greeting and closing, essential elements for an epistle.

Finally, the intended audience of the epistle should be addressed – it was clearly written to a specific group of people; they had suffered persecution and were likely to suffer more, they were familiar with the Septuagint and likely were urban. Some of them had stopped assembling – perhaps stopped making public practice of the faith, likely because of persecution. In addition, the letter discusses the disagreement between two camps of the early Church; the Judaizers who felt Christians must keep to the Jewish law and convert to Judaism, and the Antinomians who felt the Jews needed

to reject the Jewish law because of Christ. The letter is felt by many to be written to Jewish Christians outside of Palestine – hence “to the Hebrews” - although there is debate and disagreement.

You'll be pleased to hear that – once the issues of authorship and audience and WHAT the book is are dealt with or set aside – the meaning and message of Hebrews is clear. It is a broad exhortation to Christians, a sweeping explanation of much of the richness of the faith, particularly with regard to the uniquely Christian elements of the worship of God. Much is made of Christ's sovereignty, His role in salvation history, and the fundamental change which took place when Christ was born, suffered, died and was resurrected. Hebrews is a book which rewards a prayerful reflection, and we should not allow our spiritual growth to be dragged down by dry and ultimately fruitless academic debates.

James

The Epistle of Saint James. There is some debate about WHICH James this epistle was written by. James was a very common name. The most commonly accepted view is that it was written by James, “the brother of the Lord” and leader of the Church in Jerusalem. He is a prominent leader of the early Church and participates in the Council of Jerusalem as described in the book of Acts.

A brief sidebar – being described as the “brother of the Lord” should not (as many Protestants do) be taken to suggest he was a son of Mary, or that Mary was not Perpetually Virgin.

The main reason for not wanting to get bogged down in that controversy is because there is a MUCH BETTER controversy to get entangled with when it comes to the letter of Saint James; namely justification by faith and works, as opposed to justification by faith alone.

Many Protestants – taking their cue from the arch-rebel Martin Luther – maintain that man is saved by faith alone. This is called “sola fide” - Latin for faith alone. Catholics – taking their cue from Jesus Christ, son of the living God – maintain that man is not saved by faith alone, but by faith AND works.

Many scriptures – particularly parts of the epistle to the Romans – are used to attempt to justify the Protestant position. Of course, such arguments rely on misinterpretation of the words of Scripture, or – in the case of Luther's translation of the Bible – the addition of words to the text of Romans. However, the only time the words “faith alone” appears in Scripture is the letter of Saint James.

Unfortunately for the Protestants, but fortunately for Catholic apologists, the words faith alone – in chapter 2 verse 24 – appear in the sentence “man is justified by works and NOT by faith alone” which, in most people's minds, is a bit of a slam-dunk.

Martin Luther wanted to cut the epistle of James out of the Bible, calling it an epistle of straw and saying it had no character of the Gospel in it. Fortunately, he was persuaded not to – but the Lutheran distaste for the epistle of James continues.

Obviously, therefore, the epistle of James is a solid apologetic tool – but to look at it merely as a method of defeating a specific heresy neglects the beauty and power of the text. When you read it – and it is not long – you will be impressed by the sensible and practical advice it contains. Some scholars feel this general letter was written by Saint James as a form of wisdom literature, containing good advice specifically tailored to the Christian experience, and for Christians living in harmony with each other. James was the moderate leader of the Judaizers party, and while he did not advocate the more extreme positions of some of this group, he does give greater emphasis to a purity of living and conduct, than those in the Antinomian faction.

First Peter

Saint Peter's first letter is the first example of a papal encyclical –. Of course, when Peter wrote this letter they didn't call them papal encyclicals, and the Church didn't have a media machine to send them to the various dioceses or have them published in the newspapers or on the Vatican website. Equally, however, there wasn't a cadre of dissenting media theologians ready to re-interpret the words of the pope into some falsehood, so perhaps that balances it out.

In any case, this letter is widely considered to have been written by Peter when he was in Rome, which puts the date in the early 60s AD. The author identifies himself as Peter, and in closing says he is writing “from Babylon”. Some scholars suggest Peter is writing from the city in the Middle East, but most scholars recognize that “Babylon” was a code-phrase for Rome.

Rome was the great city, the center of the powerful empire when the Jews were living in, and was a center of depravity and pagan power. In the Jewish historical experience, this was Babylon, the capital of the Babylonian empire who had captured the Jews in 587 BC and held them for the Babylonian captivity until they were released by Cyrus the Great of Persia.

Some scholars have maintained the letter is unlikely to have been written by the relatively uneducated Peter – a fisherman whose Galilean accent, an accent of a somewhat backward area of Palestine, was so strong he was recognized by it during Holy Week – because the Greek in this letter is very good indeed. To this charge, one simply needs to turn to the end of the letter, where it is made clear Peter's letter has been dictated to Silvanus, his secretary. Obviously, like any good assistant, Silvanus has corrected his boss' errors and produced a well-written piece – this does not detract from Peter's authorship in any way.

The letter is addressed to the Christians in Asia Minor, although the content of the letter is applicable to all Christians – which likely explain its inclusion in the canon. It makes frequent reference to baptism and the new life in baptism, which suggests the letter, was intended for the newly baptized. Certainly, it is very appropriate for those newly-received into the Church to read it, but there is much in here for all Catholics.

When the letter was written, Christianity was a minor sect in a pagan world, undergoing much persecution – within a few years, the author himself would be crucified – and accordingly the text exhorts the audience to be brave and stalwart in the face of this persecution. This is a central theme we can take from it, and the letter is especially powerful for new Christians who are stepping into a very hostile world with their new white garments.

Second Peter

The Second letter of Saint Peter, like First Peter, is good to look at as we would a Papal Encyclical – it is written in a particular time and place, but has great relevance and importance for all Christians. Both letters of Saint Peter seem especially timely for us, in the modern world.

The letter exhorts Christians to patience – Peter was writing to Christians confused by Christ's failure to have returned. In the early Church, it was assumed – incorrectly – that Christ would be returning not only soon, but soon in human terms; people thought Christ was going to come back in a few years, certainly within the lifetime of the people who had known Him during His ministry. Obviously, this was an incorrect notion and many Christians were confused.

Peter counsels not only patience, but also alert and faithful perseverance in the faith and upright moral living – a teaching which has much in common with the parable of the wise and foolish virgins with their lamps. The letter addresses the same concern as Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians – they were concerned about those who had died

before the coming of the Lord, and so Paul reassures them by explaining what will happen at the Second Coming of Christ.

Of course, as was discussed in First Thessalonians, some Protestants misinterpret that passage and get the idea of 'The Rapture' from it. Peter SPECIFICALLY addresses the tendency of people to misinterpret the words of Saint Paul in this letter; in chapter 3 verse 16 he says unstable people twist Paul's letters as they do the rest of scripture, to their own destruction.

How very like the Pope to give us such a great verse to address the idea of scriptural misinterpretation, and a solid warning against it! As an apologist, be sure to remember this verse as it is very useful when addressing the idea that the Bible can be interpreted by anyone correctly – even in the very early days of the Church, when the Bible was still being written, it was recognized that the scriptures could be twisted to support falsehoods. Another good verse from this same letter is chapter 1 verse 20; here Peter explicitly says scripture is not a matter of private interpretation – a very appropriate thing for the Pope, protected by the Holy Spirit from error, to say!

Some modern scholars maintain Second Peter has nothing to do with the first pope. They say that it was written long after his death, and addresses issues which did not arise during his lifetime. They use various arguments to support this position, but the idea Peter had nothing to do with this letter is ultimately untenable. The letter certainly comes from a later period than First Peter – hence, Peter's SECOND Letter – and it is possible it has been expanded on and added to by later writers, creating a text which reflects the teaching of the first pope and addresses the topics he was addressing.

However, an early section describes the Transfiguration – an event Peter was present for – and does so in a manner quite unlike apocryphal work from the period; the description is measured and subtle, not complex and fantastic. Apocryphal works – seeking to make them sound more impressive – have grand descriptions, full of minor details or chuck-full of fantastic, dramatic, supernatural elements. In contrast to this, the description of the Transfiguration is humble and simple, entirely in keeping with Peter's personality and honesty. The miracle is not played down or dismissed, but neither is it turned into some event unlike the Gospel account.

Of course, the authenticity of Scripture – the stamp of inspiration by God and the appropriateness of it to be read aloud at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass – does not come from academics or scholars, but rather the Church herself. Peter's second letter – written to protect Christians from impatience, debauchery and being led astray by false prophets and false interpretations – has been part of the canon since the earliest days.

First John

The First Letter of John week is the first of three letters connected not only by author, but by theme. This is the longest letter, the other two are mere notes by comparison, but even this is not very long. It is, however, beautiful and absolutely packed with information.

Because of the similarity of theme, style and content, it is all-but universally felt that the Gospel of John and the three epistles of John were all written by the same person. This view has prevailed since the earliest days of the Church, and really hasn't been seriously challenged. A couple of modern scholars have felt the works might have been by different authors, but there is little support for this view. Certainly, the works reflect the same theological position and view – one which emphasizes Christ's divinity and the glory of God.

It is generally felt that the Apostle John wrote the letters towards the end of his life, in the city of Ephesus. A general date for them is the late 90s, a few years before 100 AD. Some scholars have put forward alternative authors or later dates, but – in the main – the consensus is that Saint John wrote them just before the turn of the century.

The letter dwells on many of the same themes as John's Gospel – naturally – and it can be good to reflect on them side-by-side. The focus is on love – love for Christ, expressed by keeping His commandments of faith, and love for one's brethren. This relationship mirrors the relationship Christ has with the Father, a theme John returns to time and again in the letter.

The letter also includes explicit warnings about the Antichrist, and while we should be careful to not read more explicitly about the end of the world than is appropriate, John's epistle is instructive and helpful. The letter speaks about a group who were once Christian, but have now embraced a false teaching about Christ and who are spreading this, under the guidance of the Antichrist. John speaks of many OTHER Antichrists – that is, false teachers, those who are against Christ – and it is not hard to see, in this letter, a warning against those within the Church who might deny specific doctrines of Christ – be it His Divinity or Incarnation, or even a clear moral precept such as abortion, contraception or homosexuality.

The style of the letter is, really, not that of a letter at all. It is structured quite differently from Paul's letters, lacking epistolary elements of a greeting and signing-off. It does not have a plainly linear structure, but rather follows “loops” of thought, developing themes by returning to them time-and-again. In this, it has much in common with Jewish poetry, and provides a beautiful framework for the very grand themes of Love and Divinity John is addressing.

A word much be said about the Johannine Comma. Chapter 5, verses 7 and 8 contain an explicit endorsement of the doctrine of the Trinity – perhaps the ONLY explicit endorsement of the Trinity in the Scriptures. The two verses, with this endorsement in place, read; "For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one."

However, many manuscripts do not include this endorsement. Instead, they read; "For there are three that bear record the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one."

The additional words are called the Johannine Comma, meaning a short clause, and a popular theory is that these words were inserted by copyists' error into the text based on a Latin gloss – an explanation – dating to the 3rd or 4th century. So, basically, a copyist made an error and copied some explanatory notes written next to the text into the text itself. The error was then copied by other copyists, leading to the spread of the inserted text.

What does this mean for us? Well, many Bibles today do not include the comma. Some include it, but with an explanatory note. When we defend the doctrine of the Trinity, we should not rely on the comma. Firstly, the discussion of its divine inspiration distracts from the main discussion and, secondly, it plays right into the hands of those who would believe in Sola Scriptura! The Trinity is a doctrine which is revealed to the Church herself, a gradual revelation whose history is not only part of the Church, but which itself supports the Church by showing how divine truths are found in places other than explicit Biblical explanation.

Second John

The Second letter of Saint John was written by John the Evangelist, author of the Gospel of John, probably in the city of Ephesus just before the turn of the first century AD.

This is a VERY short letter indeed – a mere note by the standards of epistles in the Bible – but it contains some very important information presented in a very beautiful manner. John begins his letter by identifying himself as the Elder – Elders were leaders in the local Church, and so THE Elder likely indicates a special position of great authority; quite appropriate for the Beloved Disciple. He then goes on to greet “The Lady” or – in Greek “Kyria” - and her children. This is generally taken to refer not to a flesh-and-blood female, but rather the local Church and the members of that parish, diocese or community. John closes by using the phrase “children of your sister”; again, not a flesh-and-blood person, but a neighboring Church.

But while the salutation and sign-off do not speak of a flesh and blood person, the rest of the letter clearly and explicitly does. John warns against those who deny the human nature of Christ, those who say Christ was ONLY a Spiritual or Divine being, and that He did not have a human nature.

Of course, Christ DOES have a human nature because without Christ being both fully God and fully Man, both Spiritual AND Physical there is no Salvation.

This letter is very clear that those who deny the Physicality of Christ, the human nature of Christ are NOT Christian, that they are the Antichrist. In this letter, it is likely that John is not speaking of a specific individual, but rather that all who deny Christ's physical nature are “against-Christ”. Then again, it is certain that THE Antichrist will deny Christ, and that his denial of Christ is very likely to take the form of a false doctrine of pure spirituality or some such nonsense.

The false teaching that Christ was not physical or not human is found in Gnosticism and Docetism, although these days those labels are not often used. You will, however, find many people who deny the physicality or humanity of Christ in one way or another and so you should be ready to defend this teaching because as we said; without the physicality of Christ's human nature, we are all damned.

John explicitly writes that if people come with a false doctrine we are to have nothing to do with them – but we must be careful to not interpret this instruction too broadly. John is writing to a specific local Church, not individual Christians at all places and times. His concern is that a false teacher might come into the community and bring his false doctrine, spreading dissent under the guise of truth. THIS is the sort of person who should be given no welcome and support – John says those who greet him share in his wickedness. We can see examples of this today with false teachers (perhaps of New Age philosophies or other claptrap) who are invited by foolish or evil pastors to give classes or whatever in parishes.

What this warning does NOT mean is that we should not speak to those with false ideas – of course we, as individual Christians and even the Church, should address falsehoods and errors, and try to correct them. But, we should never give false teachers a platform to preach their lies, especially if it would look like this false teaching had the endorsement of the Church herself.

A valuable apologetic tool – towards the end of the letter, John writes he has more to say, but does not want to write it down because the information is sensitive. Perhaps he is concerned the letter will be intercepted and read by enemies of the Church, such as the Gnostics he warns about? Regardless of this, this passage is VERY useful when arguing against Sola Scriptura – here we have the Apostle John saying there are important things to say, but he is EXPLICITLY not writing them down. Well . . . if there are important things and they are not written down, how are we to know what they are if we only go by what is written?

Third John

The third letter of Saint John, as with the other two letters, was likely written in Ephesus towards the end of the first century AD by the Apostle John. In terms of style and phrasing this letter shares a great deal with the second letter, and like it is very short. It is written to a man named Gaius. Gaius was a common Roman name – it was actually Julius Caesar's first name – and we know little about the man the letter was written to. It is clear he is a Christian and likely a close friend of John, as the Apostle writes personal greetings to him. John singles him out for praise after helping some Christians who were strangers to him.

The main portion of the letter contains information about two people – Diotrephes and Demetrius. Diotrephes is shown as a bad example, and people are warned against following him. John says he will expose his wickedness, and gives examples of it – but it is not made explicitly clear WHY Diotrephes is acting the way he does. A clue, however, is found when John writes that he “enjoys being in charge of the Church” and that he refuses to accept the Apostle. It is fair to assume jealousy and pride, a desire for personal importance, is at the root of this wickedness. John does not make the point in this personal letter, but the dangers of seeking power in the Church for its own sake, rather than the sake of serving Christ and His people, are made clear elsewhere in the New Testament, and are a warning to all of us – even those of us who are not formal leaders or pastors.

Compared to Diotephes, Demetrius gets very little attention – although that attention is good. He is upheld as a fine example and John vouches for him. Perhaps the lesson we can take from this is that – even in the early days of the Church – bishops had to spend most of their time dealing with problems rather than praising those doing well!

As in his second letter, John says he has more to say but does not want to write it down – again, a powerful argument against Sola Scriptura and one which many Protestants might not be familiar with or immediately have a counter to.

Jude

The Epistle of Saint Jude is the last of the Catholic Epistles. This is a short letter and is very interesting for its content and also for its historical and literary questions as it warns against false-teachers. It is generally thought that the work was written in the latter third of the first century. There is some debate as to who the author is – Jude was a common name, and so was James, the brother of Jude identified in the letter. The generally accepted view is that the author is Jude, one of the Twelve Disciples, and the patron saint of hopeless causes.

One of the reasons this book was so widely accepted is the relation between it and Second Peter. The second chapter of Second Peter is very similar in many ways to the Epistle of Jude. Many scholars feel that the First Pope may have drawn on this letter as inspiration for his own work. Alternatively, other scholars – citing the fact Jude verse 18 quotes Second Peter 3:3 in the past tense – put the influence the other way around. No matter which of these is the accurate view, it is clear that the apostles were happy to be inspired by each other, sharing the wisdom of Christ with the various communities they were leading.

But as well as referencing books of the canonical Bible, the epistle of Jude also references books which are NOT in the Bible. In verse 9 Jude makes reference to Michael contending with Satan over the body of Moses. This, many scholars believe, refers to an episode in the Assumption of Moses, a non-canonical book known from a single 6th century manuscript. The story is that Satan decided, in order to lead the Jews astray, to take Moses' body and build a grand tomb, which would function as a place of worship, thus tricking the Jews into idolatry of their great leader and prophet. The Archangel Michael, protector of the Jewish people and God's champion, faced off against the Devil, preventing him from taking the body. And, as it says in the Pentateuch, no-one knows the location of Moses' tomb.

Jude also references the non-canonical Book of Enoch, a book which deals with a group of Angels called the Watchers. He quotes from this book in verses 14 and 15.

What are we to make of the references to these non-canonical books? Well, firstly, it is clear that the authors of Scripture were drawing from a broad base of Jewish writings as they wrote, and did not have a problem with referencing these works.

Secondly, we should not assume that – simply because something is referenced by a book of the Bible – it should be IN the Bible! Many people will want to sweep the Book of Enoch into the Bible, and will draw all sorts of strange conclusions from it. Jude's referencing it need not be seen as an endorsement of the book as a whole. Remember; if the Holy Spirit had WANTED the book of Enoch in the Bible, the Holy Spirit would have inspired the Church to put it in the Bible! THAT is the measure of whether a book should be in the Bible – does the Church, which is the foundation of the truth and the mystical body of Christ – want the book in there? We can look at the various methods and criteria for WHY the Church made the choices she made, but – ultimately – it is our duty to obediently accept the canon, not to try to reinvent it based on our own criteria or personal interpretations of the Church's criteria. That would be a terrifically arrogant thing to do, which is why Martin Luther's actions are so terrible.

Finally, the references to these books can be used as an argument against Sola Scriptura. The idea of Sola Scriptura is very limiting – binding one to finding truth in a small group of books. Of course, the Bible contains nothing BUT truth, and so is superior to all other books, but not all truth is in the Bible, as can be seen by the external references to other works. If the Apostles themselves chose to go outside the Scriptures for examples, instruction and truth, then should we not do the same, especially when so many clear examples AGAINST sola scriptura are given in the Bible?

Martin Luther propensity for wanting to take books out of the Bible for no good reason.

We've discussed before how he did remove the seven Deuterocanonical books from his translation of the Bible, but what is not as widely known is that he tried to remove the books of Hebrews, the epistle of James, the book of Revelation and the epistle of Jude from the New Testament. He felt these books did not support his heretical doctrine of Sola Fide and so he wanted to remove them.

Intelligent and perceptive observers will note that coming up with a doctrine and then slicing books out of the Bible, and THEN relying on the Bible to support those doctrines is kind of cheating. Luther's desire to remove this book is very strange, simply because the book was accepted as authentic by the Church from the earliest days.

Revelation

The book of Revelation, or Apocalypse, is the last book of the Bible, and God's final word in Sacred Scripture. The book of Revelation is the only example of so-called apocalyptic literature we have in canonical scripture, although it was a fairly common genre in the ancient world. Apocalyptic literature seeks to tell spiritual truths through visionary imagery. It has much in common with a lot of the prophetic books.

The non-canonical apocalyptic literature contains visions and imagery which are either made up out of whole cloth simply to advance a point – a poetic metaphor – or visions sent from a source other than the divine. This source might not be a demonic influence – the use of hallucinogenic drugs was common in various so-called prophets in the pagan communities, and the weird visions resulting from narcotics were interpreted as messages from the gods.

But the Apocalypse of Saint John is a different sort of book – the visions are prophetic visions, sent to John by God Himself and for much the same purpose as the visions of the Old Testament prophets. It is written to strengthen the

people of God during a time of persecution, encouraging them to persevere under harsh conditions and frequent martyrdom. The difference, of course, is that the prophecies do not speak of the future coming of the Messiah – the Messiah has already come and is here, within the tabernacles and on the altars of the Churches – but rather draw the veil back from what is happening now, putting the current persecutions in context and interpreting the Mass on earth as mirroring the eternal Mass in Heaven. In addition, the book describes much of what will happen at the end of time. This portion of the narrative gets a lot of attention.

The traditional view is that the book was written around 95AD, towards the end of the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian who persecuted the Christians severely. Other scholars feel an earlier date is suggested, around 68 AD, during the reign of the infamous Nero. The more popular date is the later one, although there is no absolute consensus.

The Roman persecutions of the Christians are well-known, at least in general – crucifixions, being thrown to the lions, torture etc. There are many martyrs from this period – the Apostles themselves were martyred – and so Christians were living under constant fear of imprisonment and death. Revelation is written to encourage these Christians, to show them the glorious future which awaits them at the end of time but also to show them the glory of the Mass and the Eucharist, making them aware of just how privileged they are to share in the Supper of the Lamb, and discouraging them from abandoning the faith in the face of death.

The author of Revelation identifies himself as John, and states he was on the island of Patmos when he received his first vision. The traditional theory is that John the Apostle, the Beloved Disciple who wrote the Gospel of John, was exiled on the isle of Patmos during the Domitian persecutions and wrote from there. Others feel that John the Evangelist and John of Patmos are different people – but the theological similarities between Revelation and the rest of the works which bear John's name suggest a connection. Ultimately, we may never know who wrote Revelation – and it is almost certain the text has been edited and expanded as John's Gospel was – but it is clear the author's theology is very close to that of the author of the Fourth Gospel.

The purpose of Revelation is to strengthen the people reading it in the face of persecution, and it achieves this by looking forward to not only a glorious reward in Heaven and beyond in the New Heaven and New Earth, but by showing the Mass as Heaven on earth.

Of course, given the interconnected nature of the Mass and the book of Revelation, it is hardly surprising that Martin Luther – no great lover of the Catholic Mass following his rebellion against the true church – objected to the book of Revelation, saying “a book of revelation should be revealing”. The fact he could not understand it – likely because of his rejection of Eucharistic theology – is no reason to reject the book from the Bible. If we all did that – cut out what we do not easily understand or disagreed with – we would each have a much smaller Bible!

Luther was eventually persuaded to leave the book in the Bible, although it was a persuasive effort by his friends. This animus towards Revelation by the first Protestant is ironic, given the fixation many Protestant sects appear to have with the text.

As we discussed in the books of Ezekiel and Daniel, prophetic books, full of fantastical and outlandish visions can be easily misinterpreted. We have to be very careful when reading prophecies, making sure we don't twist them to fit our own notions or ideas. We must never interpret scripture outside of the teaching of the Church who gave us the Scriptures.

Of course, Protestants, who have rejected the Church, feel free to make up all sorts of crazy things, twisting the prophecies of Revelation to confirm to their own flawed theology and, even, personal geopolitical views.

Scripture is designed to teach truths to all men in all ages, not to speak to a single specific issue at a single specific time. With regard to Revelation, and the propensity for Protestants to focus on end-times interpretations, this is particularly pertinent. Does it make sense that God would include a book of the Bible which is ONLY of relevance to a brief period of time shortly before the end of the world? It is clear that – no matter what Revelation has to say about the end of the world – it also has many more things to say about many other subjects.

Revelation is the culmination of scripture, it brings everything together – all the promises of God throughout the Bible are fulfilled and come to fruition in Revelation. Not only are all the Messianic prophecies fulfilled in the description of the Mass, but the end-times promises of Christ of the New Heaven and the New Earth are revealed. The story that began to be told in Genesis with the creation of the world and the first fall of man in the Garden reaches its completion in Revelation. If the Bible didn't end with Revelation . . . it would probably be necessary to change the order of the books.

Scripture is the Word of the Living God, one of the ways He communicates Himself to us.