

The Holy Library -2

Romans 15:4 NRS For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.

2Timothy 3:14-17 NRS But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, ¹⁵ and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

Luke 4:16-21 NRS When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." ²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

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Last week we explored how the Bible came to be. There were lots of writings that were considered for the Old Testament and the New Testament. It wasn't until after 100 AD that the councils of rabbis reached consensus on which texts were sacred scripture. Eventually, those same documents were recognized as scripture for Christians, as well.

Agreements as to what writings were scripture for Christians didn't come until the late fourth or early fifth century AD. And the texts that we know as the book of James and the book of Revelation were reconsidered in the 1500s.

The three passages that Sue read all allude to a single point. The scriptures that are referred to are the ancient Hebrew writings that we call the Old Testament. The Bible that Jesus read, the scriptures of "former days," and the scripture that is suitable for teaching and reproof is the scripture we find in the Old Testament. There was no New Testament when these texts were written. The writings that were selected for the Old and New Testaments were selected by wise, studious, devout, and faithful people. They made their decisions with great care and trembling at the great responsibility involved.

Taken as a whole, the selected documents form a library. What sort of documents are in the library? In the video that POYQ watched two weeks ago, a wonderful comparison was made between music and the texts in the Bible. We all know that there are different kinds of music and how we dance, how we participate in the music, depends on what kind of genre it is. Country Western might call for us to do the Cotton-eyed Joe or the Texas Two-step. But a completely different dance step would be needed for music with a Latin beat – a cha-cha-cha or a tango, perhaps. You can disco dance to the Bee Gees, but it won't work with techno rock. Different genres of music call for different dance styles.

In the library that we call the Bible there are many writing genres and we need to recognize the genre so that we know how to dance with the text, how to read and experience the text. Leviticus is essentially a law book, filled with detailed regulations. Exodus, Ezra, and Acts are examples of the genre of history; Exodus does have a bit of law in it. The Major

Prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah, and the Minor Prophets such as Jonah and Micah are filled with preaching, but sometimes in the context of history. We need to remember that the Minor Prophets are called minor, not because they are less important, but because those texts are short.

The Gospels are about the life and teachings of Jesus. We need to understand that putting everything in chronological order wasn't the point of these texts and so they differ from biographies as we know them. Sprinkled through the gospels is a unique literary form called a parable. A parable isn't a factual story, but a story with an unexpected twist that reveals truth. The prodigal son returned home looking for a job as a field hand. Instead of anger and punishment from his father, he received extravagant welcome, sumptuous hospitality, and complete restoration to his former status, an unexpected twist that reveals the steadfast unqualified love of God for us.

Just as we don't read parables as history, so too, we read poetry with a different eye than we do law. The poems of the Psalms serve as praise music, as confession of our fears and frailty, and as a way to shake our fist at God in frustration over the troubles and calamities of life. Some of the Psalms are liturgy, obviously structured to be litanies recited back and forth between worshipers and those leading worship. The first chapter of Genesis is meant to be liturgy in poetry, not scientific history.

When we read the letters of Paul and the other letters in the New Testament, we should read them as the genre that they are – letters. So, it's important to keep in mind who the letter is written to and the circumstances that are being addressed. In other words, context helps us better understand the message of the letter.

The most difficult and perhaps the most misused scriptures are those that are in the apocalypse genre. For about four hundred years, from about 200 BC to 200AD, apocalyptic literature was written. Its form was a divine disclosure that came via angels, dreams, or visions and that was recorded in a secret book in highly symbolic language. The two major examples in the Bible are the book of Daniel in the Old Testament and Revelation in the New Testament. Because it's a genre that hasn't been used in almost eighteen centuries, it's difficult for us to know quite how to read it. In every age, in every century, Revelation has been read as being directed at that time in history. Every time that has been the approach it's proved wrong.

The final genre to consider in scripture is myth, myth in the formal definition as a type of literature. Myth isn't a lie, in fact, it is more than true. A myth is a traditional story with an unknown author, with a historical basis, explaining the origins or customs of a people. As the old Indian said as he sat with the children around the campfire to tell them the ancient stories of his people, "I don't know if it really happened this way, but I know that it is true." In a similar fashion, we tell fairy tales to our children, not because we think that they are factual, but because they convey deep basic truths. We watched a cartoon version of Tom Thumb at Summer Plus. It's not factual, but it conveys the important lesson that your worth doesn't depend on your size and strength. G. K. Chesterton once said, "Fairy tales are more than true; not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten." When we read some of the stories in scripture, we need to consider if their purpose is to convey truth, not facts.

So, here are some things to keep in mind as you seek to know God and increase in wisdom as you read scripture. Pay attention to what literary genre you are reading. That will help you to correctly understand the text.

The Bible isn't a scientific textbook. The writers were certain that the earth was flat and that it stood still while the sun, moon, and stars moved around a firmly anchored earth.

I began by saying that I was going to let the cat out of the bag regarding POYQ. Obviously that was an expression, an idiom. There's no bag and no cat. The Greek and Hebrew languages have idioms, too. Expect to find expressions that are part of the ancient culture and language. Also, expect to find humor, sarcasm, exaggeration, and satire in the texts when you read them closely.

Scripture points beyond itself to God. Don't worship the finger. Scripture is like a window through which we get a glimpse of God. We're to be in a living relationship with God. Scripture starts the conversation.

God's attributes are power, wisdom, beauty, intelligence. Always seek the most charitable interpretation of a text. Remember that Jesus said the greatest commandment was to love God completely and the second greatest was to love our neighbor like our self. And all of the law, all of what God expects of us is to conform to those two directives. In a similar way, Jesus said that all of the law and the prophets rests on the principle of what we call the Golden Rule. Treat everybody else like you would like to be treated. If an action or a regulation doesn't conform to these standards of love and respect, then we must call it into serious doubt.

God gave you a brain. Don't set it aside when you read your Bible. Don't leave your brain in the parking lot when you come to worship. Remember, the Bible is too good and too important to be read without thinking. Amen.

Sisters and brothers,
The Bible is a library that points to God.
Be aware of what genre of literature you are reading when you study it.
Be thankful for all those who mined all of the ancient writings
for these documents that contain golden wisdom,
but do not fall into Bible idolatry.