

PREFACE

When I first began teaching a course titled *The Bible as Literature* at the University of New Orleans in 1980, I did not foresee that I would eventually take much of my UNO approach to the Bible back to the church, first to Trinity Episcopal Church in Boston, and then to Trinity Episcopal in New Orleans. Approaching the Bible as a great compilation of intriguing sacred stories and rich poetry saves us from having to ask, at least as the primary question: Did it really happen that way? Students in my course and members of my church could for a time put aside previous opinions of what the Bible is, relax, and begin a rewarding dialogue with the literature and with each other. (See Supplement A for a discussion of "The Making of the Bible.")

Jesus taught most often in parables so that those who heard would reach for the meaning to which the stories pointed and, in the reaching, grow. But I believe he had something else in mind as well. He must have known that those who heard his short, poignant stories would understand them in different ways, just as those who hear those same stories today understand them in different ways. Great! he must have thought. Those who hear will learn not just from me but from each other. In a Biblical study like this, I hope that we will both learn from the great literature of the Bible and we will also and always be willing to learn from each other.

This kind of Biblical study is not for everyone. For those who do undertake it, we will together move forward on an incredible but not incredulous journey—one that takes us from the beginning of Creation "when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy" to the very end, when the New Jerusalem comes down from heaven as "a bride adorned for her husband."

We can't cover everything in thirty-six sessions, but we can cover quite a lot. Instead of surveying the literature, I much prefer to focus on key passages and with the reader "plow deep." I connect each passage being studied with the next and then the next, so that the reader sees both the Hebrew and the Christian Scripture as a whole and has a sense of the chronology of both. See the timeline at the end of this Preface. Readers exploring particular passages in depth in the future will have a better context in which to understand those passages.

Since this is a course that focuses on the transforming literature of the Bible, I concentrate on theme (God's ways to humankind and our response to God and to one another), narrative (what makes a story great), characterization (the weaknesses as well as the strengths of the personalities of the Bible), setting (where and when the stories unfold), historical context (who the stories were written for), and of course the imagery and the poetry (in the prose as well as in the verses). See Supplement B for a brief discussion of Hebrew and New Testament poetry.

Over the years, I have taught many courses in which the participants and I respond to particularly poignant short fiction or narratives in a faith perspective, seeing how the great themes of Scripture resonate with these stories, stories by such writers as Flannery O'Connor, Raymond Carver, and Frederick Buechner. *Listening for God, Volume One* edited by Paula Carlson and Peter Hawkins (Augsburg Fortress Press, 1994) contains four of these stories; other parallel readings are suggested in Supplement F.

The passages from Scripture that are quoted in the text come from either the Revised Standard Version or the New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise indicated. I assume that all who take this course will diligently read the assigned passages in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (College Edition or Study Edition) of the NRSV. The introductions to each book of the Bible, the footnotes, and the maps are most helpful in a course like this. But it is always good to read, as you can, the passages in that great triumph of Elizabethan English, the King James Version, especially in a course like this.

My hope is that those who take this course will plan to spend two hours a week on each session in a seminar setting. The first hour should be devoted to reflecting on the assigned Scripture and this commentary; the second, to personal responses to the Biblical content. How does a particular story or event or teaching touch my life? What does it say about our culture, our church? After reading the Biblical story and discussing it in the seminar, you will, I hope, address the primary question: So what? How does it matter to me! What is God saying through the story? Responding to that question is hard work but most rewarding; it is the beginning of transformation.

And remember what God may be saying to us is not necessarily what the writer of the passage meant. When for example, the author of the Book of Joshua celebrates ethnic cleansing of the worst kind (see Joshua 6:21, 8:24-25, 10:40 and 11:20), we cannot believe that God wants us to be agents of genocide.

At the beginning of each session is a brief summary of the Biblical material being studied as well as a few questions to think about as you read. (You may want to read the Scripture before you read my commentary. This way you will read the Good Book with fresh eyes, your eyes. However, if the Biblical material seems hard to understand or put in a context, you may need to read the commentary first.) The questions at the beginning can facilitate discussion during the first hour of the seminar. At the end of each session are several questions designed to help you connect with the material. These and other "personal connection" questions that arise for you should be discussed in the second hour of the seminar.

I hope you will respond to the literature of the Bible the way James Dickey, the late American poet laureate, invited readers to respond to poetry:

The first thing to understand about poetry is that it comes to you from outside you, in books or in words, but that for it to live, something from within you must come to it and meet it and complete it. Your response with your own mind and body and memory and emotions gives the poem its ability to work its magic; if you give to it, it will give to you and give plenty.

Give to the Bible and it will give to you-plenty, like the five loaves and two fish, more than enough!

While I do not dwell on contemporary debate regarding Scriptural interpretation, I do try to follow mainstream scholarship (if you can call any Scriptural interpretation "mainstream") and I do name the times when I find myself disagreeing with it in significant ways. The following commentaries have been particularly helpful: Understanding the Old Testament by Bernard Anderson, The Creation and the Fall by Deitrich Bonhoeffer, Genesis and Old Testament Theology by Gerhard von Rad, The Gospel of Mark by Morna Hooker, A Preface to Mark by Christopher Bryant,

Acts in the Interpretation series by William Willimon, the relevant volumes of The New Interpreter's Bible (especially the commentaries on John and Romans), The Good Book by Peter Gomes, and various commentaries by Walter Brueggemann. I also make use of a book that I published in 1982, *Our Story According to St. Mark*. My professors at Virginia Theological Seminary (in the late 1960s) all made exploring the transforming literature of the Bible an exciting lifelong task. I think especially of Murray Newman, Holt Graham, and Dick Reid. My more recent mentors include John Jenkins, the founder of the Disciples of Christ in Community program, and Sam Lloyd, Dean of the Washington National Cathedral.

My heartfelt thanks to Corinne Barnwell (I am her husband) and my daughter Mary Royall Byrum, who read through, edited, and made suggestions during and after the first draft. And more thanks to those, clergy and lay, who bravely led semester- or year-long seminars to try out the material: John Dale and Penny Janeway in Boston, Lee Winter and Brucie Rafferty at Trinity Church in New Orleans, Joe Tucker and Merry Toups at the Chapel of the Holy Spirit in New Orleans, Robbie McQuiston and Katherine Bush at the Church of the Holy Comforter in Memphis, and Nancy Rockwell of the Congregational Church in Exeter, New Hampshire (UCC). And even more thanks to those who participated in these groups.

One group that tried out the course approved of my commentary on the Hebrew Scripture-"You stood at the door and welcomed us in." But they were not so enthusiastic about my approach to the Christian Testament-"You not only welcomed us," they said, "but sometimes you tried to lasso us and haul us in." Probably a pretty good observation! When I was teaching the Bible as Literature at the University of New Orleans, I was supposed to teach the course in a secular way (I didn't always succeed). But this course is admittedly from faith to faith. And it is probably true that my particular faith shows up more in my reflections on the New Testament.

William H. Barnwell (The Rev.)
Canon Missioner
Washington National Cathedral
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Suggestions for the Participants

- After reading the assigned passages, you may want to read again each of the passages highlighted in the commentary.
- Many of the participants in the courses I have led have kept a "Literature Journal" as part of their preparation for each session. When a particular passage touches your life in some way, you stop and write down some of your story. Don't worry if the fit seems strained; just write what comes to your mind. The "Personal Connections" questions at the end of each session should help. Besides giving you more insight into the Bible and perhaps your own life, this kind of journal keeping can be a great help to seminar discussions. See Supplement C for ideas. You may find journal keeping particularly meaningful in your study of Mark's Gospel, as you ask how events in the life of Jesus touch your life. The more you prepare your own personal connections with the material being studied, the better the discussions will be.
- You will see at the end of this Preface a timeline that is roughly equivalent to the timeline presented in the Oxford Annotated. That plus the maps at the back of The Oxford Annotated should help you appreciate the historical context and the setting for the various stories.
- Be sure to read in The Oxford Annotated all the introductions to the books of the Bible that we examine. Many of the footnotes can be helpful as well.
- You should allow two to four hours of preparation for most sessions. Some of the longer Biblical readings may require more time. When you see longer readings coming up, read ahead. If you can't complete the assigned reading for a particular session, try at least to read the highlighted passages in the commentary.
- You may want to read the introductions to the short stories and other parallel reading ahead of time. You will see them toward the end of the sessions.
- Think of your role as a participant in the seminar as one who listens and learns from others and as one who contributes to the discussion. The seminars should be times when you do learn from one another, not times to argue that you are right and the others are wrong.

Suggestions for Seminar Leaders

- Seminars for this kind of study work best when there are no more than eleven or twelve participants including the seminar leader (or leaders).
- You may want to ask each member of the group (on a rotating basis) to begin the discussion in the first hour by responding to one or more questions on the content of the material being studied. The introductory questions should help.
- A tried-and-true way of structuring the discussion for the first hour but especially for the second hour is to give each participant a chance to make his or her response to the Biblical material before there is any cross discussion. What each person says is accepted. You do not have to agree, but you may learn from that person. And remember: In a group like this, you never have to vote!
- I suggest that one of the group members (on a rotating basis) prepare a full personal response to begin the discussion in the second hour. But all should prepare their personal responses to the material being studied. The better the preparation, the better the discussions will be. As I mentioned earlier, for most this is hard work, indeed! See Supplement C for examples of personal responses to particular passages.
- About half way through the Old Testament study and half way through the New Testament study, you may want to devote one of "the second hours" to a discussion of just how transforming this study of Scripture has been and how the seminar group has helped. (See "personal connections" that follow Session #8 and #9 in the study of the Old Testament.)
- Each member of the seminar should commit him- or herself to listen actively to every one else. Here is the German theologian and World War II martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer on the subject (from his book *Life Together*): "On the ministry of listening: The first service that one owes to others in community consists in learning to listen to them. Just as love for God begins with listening to his word so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them. . . . He who can no longer listen to his brother will soon be no longer listening to God either."

- Perhaps more than anything else, a Spiritual Lifeline exercise can help the participants come together and, as a group, grow strong, especially if is offered in the first few weeks of the course. You should probably set aside most of a day for the participants to illustrate and then share their lifelines. See Supplement D.
- Read key short passages aloud in the seminar. Both the Old and New Testaments were written to be read aloud. The spoken word remains strong even in translation.
- You will make each group experience richer by offering prayers at the beginning or at the end of the session. If you offer prayers at the end, whatever is unresolved can be offered up to God. Many evening groups find it enriching to close with Compline, in the Book of Common Prayer.
- Some participants have complained that some of the readings are too long. If this is the case in your group, ask participants to read ahead when you know longer readings are required in upcoming sessions or simply to read what they can but to be sure to read the passages highlighted in the commentary.

Making the Study Fit Your Schedule

The course is designed to be offered either as The Hebrew Scripture or as The Christian Testament. If you offer both in the same academic year, that may necessitate some doubling up. In the Hebrew Scripture, you could combine Session #5 and #6; in the Christian Testament, you could combine Sessions #1 and 2 or # 2 and 3 and #18 and 19. (Or, you could save the two sessions on John for another time.)

If on the other hand, you offer either the Hebrew Scripture or the Christian Testament in one academic year and have more time, you could devote two weeks to particular sessions that require extensive or close reading, like Sessions #10-12 in Book One and Sessions 9, 13, and 14 in Book Two.

A Timeline of Events

Though generally consistent with the timeline presented in *The New Oxford Annotated*, one should view some of the early and even later dates in this timeline as educated guesses. They do, however, indicate approximate times when key events took place and, just as important, the order in which they took place. Along with the maps in the back of *The New Oxford Annotated*, this abbreviated timeline should give you something of the setting and the historical context of the stories of the Bible. The books of the Bible that we focus on in this study are highlighted.

Before 1600 BCE Pre-history: The stories of the Creation and the Fall in Genesis

1600-1400	Age of the Patriarchs in Genesis: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph
1400-1280	The Egyptian Period
1280	The Exodus: Moses delivers the people from slavery in Egypt and receives the Law at Mt. Sinai as recorded in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers
1280-1240	The Wilderness Period ending with Moses receiving the Second Law (in Deuteronomy) on the Plains of Moab
1240-1220	The Conquest of Canaan under Joshua
1220-1030	The Period of the Judges
1030-922	The United Kingdom (the reigns of Saul, David, and Solomon as recorded in I and II Samuel and I Kings)
922	The Division of the Kingdom into the North (Israel) and the South (Judah)
750	The time of Amos and Hosea in the North
750-700	The time of Isaiah of Jerusalem in the South
722	The Fall of the Northern Kingdom
621	The Reforms of King Josiah in the South
625-580	The time of the prophet Jeremiah in the South
597-587	The Southern Kingdom is defeated and the people sent into exile

587-537	Babylonian Captivity: The time of Second Isaiah
537	Cyrus of Persia frees the People
537-200	The Return and Restoration of the Kingdom. The time of the writing of Jonah, Ruth, the Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, and Job. While the Psalms were probably written throughout Israel's history, they were collected and expanded during this period.
400	The Pentateuch (Genesis through Deuteronomy) is put together in its final form
90 CE	(the Common Era) At the Council of Jamnia, Jewish scholars and leaders establish the canon of the Hebrew Scripture.
4 BCE	The birth of Jesus (later calendars had to be corrected)
25-30 CE	Jesus is crucified
35	Paul converts to Christianity
50-58	Paul writes letters to the young churches including I Corinthians, Philemon, Galatians, Philippians, Romans
64	Nero executes hundreds of Christians in Rome, including apparently both Peter and Paul
68-70	Mark writes his Gospel
70	Romans soldiers destroy Jerusalem, including the Temple
80-90	Luke and Matthew write their Gospels; Luke then writes Acts
About 90	John writes his Gospel.
After 90	Other books of the New Testament are written, including I John, Hebrews, James, and Revelation.
About 315	Constantine effectively makes Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire. (The process was gradual.)
397	At the Council of Carthage, Christian scholars and leaders establish the universally recognized canon of the New Testament.
1611	The King James Version (KJV) of the Bible is published.

1952 The Revised Standard Version (RSV) of the Bible is published.

1970 The New English Bible with the Old Testament (NEB) is published.

1989 The New Revised Standard Version (NSRV) is published.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

BOOK ONE: THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES

PREFACE

PART ONE: THE GREAT STORIES OF GENESIS

Session #1 In the Beginning: The Two Creation Stories (Genesis 1 and 2)

Session #2 The Fall and Alice Walker's "The Welcome Table" (Gen. 3)

Session #3 The Yahwist's View of Life (Gen. 3:1-11:9) and Flannery O'Connor's "Revelation"

Session #4 Abraham, the Man of Faith (Genesis 11:10-25:11) and "Abraham and Isaac,"
a Mystery Play

Session #5 Jacob (Israel), Who Was Blessed and Who Struggled with God (Gen. 25:12-35:29)

Session #6 Joseph, Model for the Israelites, a Precursor of Jesus (Gen. 37-50)

PART TWO: HOW THE "HABIRU" BECAME A PEOPLE OF GOD

Session #7 Moses, the Reluctant but Persevering Leader (Exodus 1:1-18:27)

Session #8 Deliverance and a Law that Unites: The Exodus and Sinai Events (Exodus 14:1-24:18
and Psalm 119)

Session #9 The Shaping of Israel's Character Through the Law, the Wilderness Experience, and
the Conquest of Canaan (Numbers 10:11 -11:35 and Joshua 1-11 and 24)

PART THREE: THE RISE AND THE FALL OF THE UNITED KINGDOM AND THE AGE OF PROPHECY

Session #10 From the Judges to Saul, "the Tragic Hero" (I Samuel 8-II Samuel 1)

Session #11 The Great (but flawed) King David (II Samuel 2:1-23:7, I Kings 1-2:12)

Session #12 From Solomon to Jeroboam II (I Kings 2-12); "The Sickness of Joseph" and the Beginning of Prophecy; The Book of Amos and Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech

Session #13 In the Wilderness with Hosea; Tearing Down and Building Up with Jeremiah (Hosea 1-3 and 11:1-9 and Jeremiah 1-12 and 30-33)

Session #14 Isaiah of Jerusalem (1-11:9) and Isaiah of the Exile (40-55)

PART FOUR: POST EXILIC WRITINGS

Session #15 God Blesses the Whole Creation (Jonah, Ruth, and Song of Solomon)

Session #16 The Wisdom Literature: The Teacher's Search for Meaning in Ecclesiastes (especially 1-5) and the Wisdom of Proverbs (1-9)

Session #17 The Question of Innocent Suffering: in Job, in the New Testament, and in Marjorie Kemper's "God's Goodness" (Job 1-14 and 38-42; "God's Goodness")

BOOK TWO: THE CHRISTIAN TESTAMENT

PART ONE: A JOURNEY WITH MARK

Session #1 An Introduction to Mark and the Prologue (1:1-13)

Session #2 A Day in the Life of Jesus (1:14-39)

Session #3 Jesus in Conflict (1:40-3:35)

Session #4 The Wisdom and the Power (4:1-6:33)

Session #5 The Bread of Heaven for the Insiders and Outsiders (6:34-8:26) and Raymond Carver's "A Small Good Thing"

Session #6 The Way of the Cross (8:27-10:45)

Session #7 Jesus in Jerusalem: A King, but What Kind of King? (11-13)

Session #8 The Passion of Jesus (14 and 15)

Session #9 The Resurrection in Mark (16:1-8), Matthew (28), Luke (24), and John (20 and 21), and in Frederick Buechner's "Dwarves in the Stable"

PART TWO: MATTHEW, LUKE, AND JOHN TELL THEIR STORY

Session #10 Luke and the Infancy Narrative (1 and 2) and Early Account of the Ministry of Jesus (3 and 4); also "The Annunciation," a Mystery Play

Session #11 Matthew and His Birth Narrative (1 and 2) and the Sermon on the Mount (5-7)

Session #12 The Parables of Matthew and Luke (Suggested readings are highlighted)

Session #13 John and the Christ of the Church-Part One (1:1-8:11)

Sessions #14 John and the Christ of the Church-Part Two (8:12-21:5)

PART THREE: FROM "THE WAY" TO THE CHURCH OF PAUL

Session #15 The Birth of the Church and the Conversion of Paul (Acts 1:1-9:31)

Session #16 The Church Grows Strong (Acts 9:32-21:13 and 26)

Session #17 Paul's Letter to the Romans (Read also I Corinthians 13)

Sessions #18 The Art of Receiving the Love of Christ and John L'Heureux's "An Expert on God" and Raymond Carver's "A Small Good Thing"

Session #19 Paul's Letters to Philemon and Galatians and Readings in I Corinthians and in later New Testament Writing (Suggested readings are highlighted)

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

Supplement A The Making of the Bible

Supplement B The Poetry of the Bible

Supplement C Examples of Personal Connections

Supplement D The Lifeline Exercise

Supplement E How Great Christian Leaders Have Viewed "The Jews"

Supplement F Parallel Readings