

Supplemental Handout for Session #7:

Some Thoughts on Reading the Scriptures Productively

Reading the Texts

I have been asked a number of questions about the historical origins and authorship of the scriptures, and about sources that discuss the historical background of different books of the bible. I have also been asked questions by people seeking a deeper understanding of passages that we either haven't been able to discuss in class or have only touched on briefly. I've also been asked questions that don't have clear cut answers, or at least not ones I'm aware of.

All of this points to a desire on the part of a large number of people to seek an ever deeper understanding of the scriptures. Hopefully these sessions, including the New Testament classes which will run through May, are contributing to this. But there is only so much that can be covered in these classes, so I want to pass on some suggestions for further reading.

The most helpful thing I can suggest is to read the chronological books of the Old Testament in their entirety. To give yourself an exposure to the full narrative of the Old Testament you should read these books in the order I list them; Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 2 Kings, Ezra, Nehemiah, 1 Maccabees, and 2 Maccabees. You can also add in Ruth, as long as you realize that this book is not the next chronological step after Judges, but instead gives a detailed description of some events that took place at the same time as Judges. 1 and 2 Chronicles can also be added in as long as you recognize that these books don't continue where 2 Kings leaves off, but instead 1 and 2 Chronicles present a condensed version of the events of 1 Samuel-2 Kings. Reading Leviticus is also helpful, as long as reading about the laws and regulations God gave to Israel doesn't bog you down as you make your way through the narrative books. After you have read the chronological books you can start to read the remaining Old Testament books, the Wisdom literature and the Prophets, with a proper understanding of the historical context they were written in.

Reading the narrative books of the Old Testament will give you a picture of God's nature, and of his dealings with his people. As we make our way through the Old Testament there are difficult passages to deal with. We learn about the wars Israel fought and the sometimes extreme punishments faced by those who violated God's laws. These passages can be difficult to understand, which is why I recommend reading the Old Testament in it's entirety. The reaction of most people who encounter the Old Testament texts in this way is one of amazement that God is so faithful and merciful in his dealings with his continuously sinful people. When the stories that are difficult to understand are seen in this context they are generally easier to come to terms with.

In these classes we are covering the Old Testament before moving on to the New. That is the opposite of the approach I usually recommend. In this case it made sense to do things this way but normally I think it is helpful to read the entire New Testament before approaching significant portions of the Old. If you have a particular interest in the Old Testament, or particular reasons and issues for approaching this portion of the bible at this time, or if your understanding of the New Testament is already reasonably strong then it probably is best for you to take on an Old Testament reading plan first. But if you have never read the New Testament all the way through, and aren't having any particular difficulties understanding the Old Testament texts we are studying, then I would suggest reading the New Testament in its entirety before diving into a substantial Old Testament reading plan.

Helpful Commentaries on Sacred Scripture

In this section there is a natural progression when it comes to the order that I recommend these books in. Introductory texts are presented prior to texts that possess a greater level of scholarly depth. However there is no hard and fast rule as to how these books have to be read, and if one of the more challenging books sounds like it addresses those issues or texts that are most relevant for you then feel free to start there.

Two very helpful, and very similar, books are *Christ in His Saints* by Father Patrick Henry Reardon and *Jesus, the Apostles, and the Early Church* by Pope Benedict XVI. The Holy Father's book is a collection of Wednesday Audience talks he gave on different figures from the New Testament, Fr. Reardon's is a collection of short essays on important figures from the Old and New Testament. Both books are very accessible and easy to read, and do an excellent job of introducing some of the major figures in biblical history.

The *Ignatius Catholic Study Bible* series provides commentaries on nearly all of the New Testament books. The remaining New Testament volumes should be published in the near future. I do not know if there is the intention of producing Old Testament volumes as well. These short commentaries, 50 to 70 pages plus a section of discussion questions at the end of each volume, each cover one of the lengthier New Testament books or several shorter ones. They provide a brief introduction to the book(s). These introductions discuss the time of the composition of these books, their authors, and major themes and ideas. The commentary on each page is in-depth without being so lengthy that it becomes overwhelming. I think that in general these books would be the best starting point for someone who is beginning to read the scriptures with greater seriousness.

The most helpful Old Testament commentaries I have come across are those of *The Navarre Bible* series produced by the University of Navarre in Spain and translated into English. This series was recently completed and there are now commentaries available on every book of the scriptures. I have found the Old Testament volumes from this series

more helpful than those that cover the New Testament. Their Old Testament volumes seem to strike the right balance when it comes to having enough commentary to help you understand the text, but not so much that you get bogged down as you try to make your way through the books of the Old Testament.

The fact that as a part of the Navarre series there is a one volume commentary on the New Testament available is important to note. The accessibility of having everything in one volume is a very helpful thing. If you are going to buy individual volumes I would recommend the Ignatius series over the Navarre series (of course you can just buy both) but the single volume Navarre New Testament commentary is a very helpful thing.

I think the next most helpful place to go, after taking advantage of some of these basic commentaries, is to get your hands on some books that defend the basic historic reliability of the New Testament. If this is an issue where you have particular struggles or questions, or an area where others are challenging you, than you might even want to start your study here. *The Case for Christ* and the *The Case for the Real Jesus* by Lee Strobel are both excellent. As a Protestant he underestimates the authoritative role of the early church's leaders, an authority which supports and stands alongside that of scripture, but despite this shortcoming I have not found better books than his when it comes to this topic. Mark Shea's book *By What Authority: An Evangelical Discovers Catholic Tradition* is also very good, but because Strobel's books cover key questions in more depth I would suggest reading one of his books prior to picking up Shea's. If you then want to take your reading in this area to another level any of the volumes of NT Wright's *Christian Origins and the Question of God* series would be excellent.

The last paragraph discussed books that would help you to intensify your study of the New Testament. After doing this it would be helpful to read some books that would allow you to do the same with the Old Testament. Lawrence Boadt's *Reading the Old Testament* provides an overview of the entire Old Testament. *Battles of the Bible* by Chaim Herzog and Mordechai Gichon is more narrowly focused but still covers significant portions of the Old Testament. *The Old Testament Documents: Are They Reliable and Relevant?* by Walter C. Kaiser discusses a number of difficult historical questions concerning the Old Testament.

I found the *The New Interpreter's Bible* commentary on Joshua and Judges very helpful. That is the only volume from that series I have turned to. It is a safe, but not certain assumption, that the other volumes of this series are equally helpful.

Believing Christian scholars hold to a wider range of interpretations when it comes to the historical accuracy of the Old Testament than they do when it comes to the New Testament. When it comes to the sources we have used in class, or the ones I have recommended here, I would classify Boadt, Herzog and Gichon, and *The New Interpreter's Bible* as moderate. *The Navarre Bible* commentaries I would describe as moderately conservative, Scott Hahn and Fr. Reardon as conservative, and Kaiser as very conservative. My views match up most closely with the approach taken in the University

of Navarre series, but wherever you fall on this spectrum I believe you can be helped by books coming from anywhere along this spectrum.

The next thing I want to be sure to do is to recommend some commentaries that will allow you to have even deeper insights into the New Testament. The first book that comes to mind is *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel* by Craig Blomberg. Unfortunately Mr. Blomberg's personal theological views seem to lead him to attempt to explain away all scriptural passages that could be seen as pointing to the sacraments. But the strengths of this book are enough to make it very much worth reading despite its problematic sections. Because of the clear difference in style that exists between John and the other three Gospels many scholars see a high degree of tension as existing between John and the other three Gospels. Blomberg does an excellent job of addressing these issues, showing that it is not necessary to accept the existence of the degree of conflict that many people see among the various Gospel accounts of the ministry of Jesus.

Jesus of Nazareth by Pope Benedict XVI is an amazing piece of scholarship. He methodically gives an overview of the scope the work and ministry of Jesus Christ. The introduction to this work also indicates that a second volume is planned. This is a very serious and substantial work and I would recommend that those who wish to read this book plan on moving through it slowly.

Pope Benedict XVI's and Blomberg's books are the first two texts that I would recommend to someone interested in a detailed and scholarly approach to the New Testament which goes beyond the depth of analysis provided by the general commentaries I described in the first paragraphs of this section. There are a number of other scholarly books I would recommend as well. When it comes to the Acts of the Apostles there is *The Anchor Bible* commentary on the Acts of the Apostles by Jesuit priest Joseph Fitzmeyer, as well as *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* by Ben Witherington. For the Gospel of Matthew there is Craig Blomberg's volume on that Gospel from *The New American Commentary* series. *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* by Ben Witherington has proved very helpful for me in recent weeks as I've prepared homilies on Mark's Gospel. The book on Revelation from the *Sacra Pagina* series by the Dominican priest Wilfred Harrington is also one I would recommend.

It is also hard to recommend strongly enough the *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* edited by D.A. Carson and G.K. Beale. This is produced by a Protestant publisher but two Catholic scripture professors, Dr. Scott Hahn and Fr. Francis Martin, are among those who officially endorse this book so I feel very safe in recommending it to Catholic readers.

The last thing I would like to mention is the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* series. This series is published by the evangelical Protestant InterVarsity Press, but it gathers quotes from the saints of the early Church. Drawing on these sources they have provided commentary on every verse of the bible in this multi-volume set. This series is probably best used for slowly praying through brief portions of scripture. It tends

to be less concerned with focusing on the overall narrative of scripture or on issues connected with the historicity of the scriptures. This series is an amazing testimony to the strides that have been made in the area of Christian unity. An American Protestant publisher is drawing on the texts that are at the center of the theological tradition of the Catholic and Orthodox churches. There are portions of this series which I think reflect some theological weakness, the section on Matthew 16 leaves out many important texts from the early Church which speak about the authority of St. Peter and the Popes who followed him, but all in all this is an excellent series that I enthusiastically recommend. I would not suggest having this as the only scripture commentary you own or read, but I would highly recommend having some of these volumes among the books you turn to.