



Holy Bible: The Written Word of God

The Holy Bible, as a religious book, has a place of paramount importance in our lives. It is the Holy Book of a religion with the highest number of following in the world. Christians, like Jews, respect and recognize the Old Testament as sacred. The Bible is the most translated and most distributed Book in the world. So far, the entire Bible has been translated into 2454 languages. In addition, the New Testament has been translated into 1168 languages and certain parts of the Bible have been translated into another 848 languages through which the Word of God has reached the people of various countries. The majority of the people in the world seek inspiration, guidance and direction from the Bible for their daily lives.

The Holy Bible is important, not only because it is a religious book, but also because this book has greatly influenced human history and human culture. Inspired by the Bible, man has produced immortal works in the field of art, literature, music, paintings, sculpture etc and these have played a very important and significant role in man's ideological growth. The Bible that proclaims human dignity and equality is the fundamental source of values like fraternity, peace, harmony and non-violence. No other book can claim such an influence over human history and civilization. We received the word of God through divine revelations and divine interventions in human history.

History of Divine Revelation

Man can come to the knowledge of God only when God reveals Himself and only to the extent He reveals Himself to him. In other words he cannot understand God totally through reason without the help of God's revelation. Therefore, the most benevolent God decided to reveal Himself and blessed us with the knowledge of His will hidden from us for ages. (Divine Revelation, n. 2) By

'*Divine Revelation*' we mean the process of God revealing Himself to man. Jesus, the Word incarnate, is the definitive and perfect revelation of God. Divine Revelation is the revelation of the word of God. Briefly, the history of divine revelation is the history of the word of God. It is the history of Jesus the Word incarnate, who is the definitive and perfect revelation. The divine revelation is definitively fulfilled through different stages of the saving plan of God.

1. Divine Revelation through Creation

God first revealed His love and mercy in and through creation. The Book of Genesis testifies that God created the world through the Word. The whole of the created world, from the creation of light on the first day to the creation of man on the sixth day, reveals God in a preliminary manner. The scriptural verse that man was created in God's own image and likeness confirms the fact that creation is God's own self-revelation. God continues to reveal through the created universe. "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork" (Psalm 19:1). Every creature in this world reveals God and through the created universe God speaks to all. God's glory and power are revealed through the mystery, that is, the universe. St. Paul makes this clear: "Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse" (Rom 1:20). Hence, the created world is the first phase and the universal form of divine revelation.

2. Revelation through Messengers

The second phase of divine revelation is the phase of messengers appointed by God. God revealed to the chosen people of Israel whom He called to be His witnesses before the whole creation through some chosen persons. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Judges, Kings and prophets were all the messengers of God. God reached His messages to the people and led the salvific plan forward from time to time through these messengers. The Old Testament gives the synopsis of such messages and the positive and negative responses of the people of Israel to such messages and revelations. The messages were introduced with the words! "The Lords says.....". They used such introductory statements to convince the people that the messages were not their own words but of God.

3. Jesus - The Definitive Revelation of God

The Word of God in its fullness is visible to us in Jesus the Incarnate. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came in to being....and we

have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son," (Jn 1:1-14). This Gospel verse witnesses to the fact that Jesus and the Word of God is one and the same. The author of the epistle to the Hebrews makes it very clear that the Word of God is fully visible after incarnation. "In many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom He appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the worlds.." (Heb 1:1-2). The saving plan of God, which began in paradise, is completed in Jesus. Jesus, the only Son of the Father, has understood the essence of divine mysteries. "No one has ever seen God; it is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (Jn 1:18). Hence we believe that the Mystery of God, which Jesus revealed, is definitive and perfect revelation of God. Since the definitive revelation through Jesus is perfect and divine, we cannot get a better revelation.

4. Divine Revelation and the Church

Jesus, the Word of God incarnate, in the fullness of time, perfected divine revelation by His presence, words and deeds. Jesus has not given us in a book-form what he has said and done. But He chose and appointed twelve apostles to bear witness to the divine revelation perfected and completed in Him and to proclaim it to the ends of the earth. They treasured and proclaimed Jesus – the definitive revelation of God and the Word of life which has existed from the very beginning, which they have heard, seen with their eyes, touched with their hands (1 Jn 1:1) The Church built on the foundation of the apostles is the body of Christ and the Church is the continuation of it on the earth. Church is the custodian, proclaimer and interpreter of the divine revelation (Word of God) handed down to us by the apostles. It is the Church that gives us the 73 Books of the Holy Bible as revealed Scriptures. These books from the Old Testament and the New Testament which were written in the Church were selected and accepted by the Church as inspired by God.

The Bible: Word of God in the Written Form

The Holy Bible contains only the written form of the divine revelation which was entrusted to the Church by God. The totality of revelation is in the Church. Divine Revelation not recorded in the Bible in the written form is called the Sacred Tradition of the Catholic Church. The WORD, that is, the Divine Revelation is handed over to us today in their totality by the Church in the written form through Sacred Scripture and in the unwritten form through Sacred Tradition (DV 9-10). The Catholic Church preserves, protects and interprets God's revelation to all men and women on the earth. The Church continues to transmit God's revelation also to those who do not accept the Catholic Church and those who try to destroy.

The Bible is a series of 73 divinely inspired books starting with the Book of Genesis and ending with the Book of Revelation. The Holy Bible got its name from the Greek term 'Biblia' and all

the books of the Old Testament except three books were written in Hebrew. The book of Wisdom and the first and second book of Maccabees were written in Greek. All the New Testament Books were written in Greek. However, there is a tradition that holds that the Gospel of Matthew was written in Aramaic.

We are accustomed to read the Bible according to verses and chapters. But when it was written, there was no separation of verses and chapters. It was Cardinal Stephen Langton, the Archbishop of England who divided the books of the Bible into chapters in A.D 1205. Robert Stephen, a missionary, divided them into verses in 1555. The whole Bible contains 1334 chapters (1074 in the Old Testament and 260 in the New Testament) and it contains altogether 35527 verses (27570 in the Old Testament and 7957 in the New Testament).

According to Jewish tradition the Old Testament Books are divided into three, namely Law, Prophets and Writings. The 'Law' is made up of the first five books of the Bible. The 'Prophetic' books are Joshua, Judges, books of Samuel, books of Kings and the books of the prophets. The remaining eleven books are known as 'Writings'. According to Christian tradition, the Old Testament books are distinguished as historical, prophetic and instructional and the New Testament as Gospels, Acts of the Apostles, Epistles of St. Paul, Catholic/Universal Epistles and Revelation.

Canonical Nature of the Bible

The Greek term 'Canon' is a word used by carpenters to refer to their measuring rod. It is the Alexandrian Bishop Tharsius (A D 293-373) who used this term for the first time to refer to the divinely inspired books in the Holy Bible in 367 A D. The motif behind the use of the term "Canon" is the thought that the word of God is the measuring rod of Christian life (Gal 6:16; Phil 3:16). The second Council of Nicea (A D 769) also defined these books as canonical books. According to the Catholic tradition the Bible contains 73 canonical books. But the Protestant reformer Martin Luther (1483-1546) declared four New Testament texts, namely, Hebrews, James, Jude and Revelation and seven Old Testament books, namely the books of Wisdom, Sirach, I and II Maccabees, Judith, Esther and Tobit as non- canonical. St. Jerome (347-420) had clearly stated that there are 46 canonical books in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, 27 books are recognized as canonical.

Translations of the Bible

The Greek translation of the Old Testament written in Hebrew is known as '*Septuagint*'. Its translation was completed around 180 B C. The Septuagint Bible contains 46 books. St. Jerome,

known as the father of Biblical studies, translated the whole Bible into Latin. This translation is known as '*Vulgate*'. The Syriac translation of the Bible is known as '*Peshitha*' Bible.

The Holy Bible: The Book Inspired by God

The Holy Bible is inspired by God. The way God helped the writers of the Bible in their writing is termed 'divine inspiration'. According to Catholic teaching, the 'Divine Inspiration' means four things

1. The writers received clear inspiration from the Holy Spirit while writing the Bible.
2. Since the human authors wrote by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they included in the Bible only what God wanted.
3. The Bible will not make mistake in the teachings related to divine subjects.
4. The style, language and theological views of the human authors will be reflected in their writings.

In the light of the above-mentioned facts, the divine inspiration is a divine act and the bible is written in human words and style. What was inspired by the Spirit of God, make such written words as the measuring criterion of divine revelation. What is originally written by the human author is inspired by God. The only criterion for measuring the authenticity of the translations is its faithfulness to the original writing. Only those translations which have the '*imprimatur*' of the Catholic Church are considered official translations. We have to make sure, therefore, that the faithful use only the translations having the *imprimatur* of a competent authority of the Catholic Church.

Explaining 'Divine Inspiration' in the Apostolic Letter '*Providentissimus Deus*', Pope Leo XIII says that the Holy Spirit, by his supernatural power, inspired, transformed and helped the authors to understand and write the inspirations of the Holy Spirit without any error or defects. Hence, we can clearly say that the author of the Bible containing eternal truths is God.

Meanings of the Holy Bible

The Holy Bible is mainly a spiritual book. God speaks to us through the words of the Bible. We must listen to the Word to grasp its meaning. According to the teaching of the Catholic Church, there are five types of meanings. One can distinguish between two senses of Scripture: the literal and the spiritual, the latter being subdivided into the allegorical, moral and anagogical senses (CCC. 115-118).

1. Literal Sense

The literal sense is the meaning conveyed by the words of Scripture and discovered by exegesis, following the rules of sound interpretation: "All other senses of Sacred Scripture are based on the literal (CCC 116).

2. Spiritual Sense

Thanks to the unity of God's plan, not only the text of Scripture but also the realities and events about which it speaks can be signs. The words, events and realities presented in the Holy Bible have a spiritual meaning beyond the literal meaning. By spiritual meaning, we understand the message that gives strength to the spiritual growth of man.

3. Symbolic Sense or Allegorical Sense.

We can acquire a more profound understanding of events by recognizing their significance in Christ; thus the crossing of the Red Sea is a sign or type of Christ's victory and also of Christian Baptism [Cf. I Cor 10:2].

4. Moral Sense

The events reported in Scripture ought to lead us to act justly. As St. Paul says, they were written "for our instruction"[I Cor 10:11; cf. Heb 3:1 -4:11]. The word of God, thus, remains as an inspiration for our lives. When we accept and live the message imparted to us through the word and events, the word becomes alive in us.

5. Anagogical sense

We can view realities and events in terms of their eternal significance, leading us toward our true homeland. Thus the Church on earth is a sign of the heavenly Jerusalem (Cf. Rev 21:1 - 22:5). Hence we must read and interpret the word of God with an orientation to heaven. The message of the word of God is made clear to us through these meanings. We are saved by understanding and putting into practice this message.

Interpretation of the Bible

The Bible - the written form of the word of God - was shaped in the Church. The Holy Bible is an inestimable treasure, which God entrusted to the Church. First and foremost, the right to interpret the word of God belongs to the Church. The Council of Vatican II gives three principles to be borne in mind while interpreting the Bible (D.V.12).

1. We must pay attention to the content and unity of the whole Bible. Though there are differences in the books of the Bible, there is a unity running through the presentation of the entire Bible. The basis of this unity is the unity of the divine revelation, for all the books in the Holy Bible were written by the inspiration of the same Spirit.
2. The living tradition of the whole Church must be taken into account along with the harmony which exists between elements of the faith. Independent interpretations separated from the traditions can go wrong.
3. Interpretation of the Bible must be based on Christian faith and teaching of the Church's Magisterium.

Let the knowledge of the Bible enable us to look at the Bible - the written word of God - with due respect, read prayerfully and discern the will of God and live accordingly.

I. Find out the Answers

1. Which are the phases of divine revelation?
2. What do you mean by the statement that the Bible is a book inspired by God?
3. Which are the areas where the importance of the Bible is manifest?
4. What are the important meanings (senses) of the Bible? Explain.
5. What were the things to be borne in mind while interpreting the Bible?

II. Let us Discuss

1. The role of God is very significant in the writing of the Bible - the word of God.
2. Cite a few anti - catholic biblical interpretations which you have heard from non - Catholics. As a catholic how will you respond to them?

III. Activity

I will read the word of God daily.

IV. Let us Enlighten our Hearts

“The words that I have spoken to you are Spirit and Life” (Jn 6:63).