

# Catholic

## UPDATE

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## THE WHOLE BIBLE AT A GLANCE

### ITS "GOLDEN THREAD" OF MEANING

VIRGINIA SMITH

**When we open the Bible, we may fall into a faulty way of thinking:** "It looks like a book and feels like a book. Therefore, the Bible is a book." We leap to this conclusion because our Bibles today are neatly bound between two covers, but that wasn't always the case.

Originally, the manuscripts that would make up the Bible were painstakingly inked onto scrolls of parchment or papyrus. In medieval times, the Scriptures were copied by hand in monastery scriptoriums. It was clear to our predecessors in the faith that they were dealing with many books, not one. The Bible is a collection of books or a library.

### FINDING OUR WAY AROUND THE LIBRARY

Based on our experience with other libraries, we're aware that not all books are alike. A typical library contains prose and poetry, biographies and essays, novels and histories, reference books and comic books.

The library of the Bible contains a number of different literary forms or types of literature: from the lyrical poetry of the Book of Psalms to the legal codes in Leviticus, from practical letters to early Christian churches to the imaginative vision of Revelation's apocalyptic style.

We're accustomed to finding books of a literary type grouped in one area of the library. While that isn't always true in the Bible, it quite often is. There are four major groupings of Old Testament books: (1) Pentateuch or Torah, (2) Historical Books, (3) Prophets, and (4) Writings or Wisdom Literature. The titles found under each heading are mostly similar in form.



The New Testament opens with four Gospels (a gospel is a literary form), followed by the Acts of the Apostles, a narrative. Twenty-one letters form the next cluster, and the apocalyptic Book of Revelation is placed last.

We don't expect all the books in a library to have been written during the same time frame. The same holds true for the Bible. Believing the Bible is inspired by God, we may be tempted to think it was published all at once and even picture it as having dropped from heaven, leather-bound and gilt-edged, with chapter and verse numbers in place. The Bible was written in different stages by authors who may have had no idea they were inspired or writing for a time and place other than their own.

The earliest Old Testament accounts, found in Genesis through Deuteronomy (the Pentateuch or Torah), were preserved through generations by word of mouth—oral tradition—and didn't take written form until about the tenth century BC. The writing that would eventually make up the Bible continued sporadically through the intervening years to the latter part of the first century AD, possibly into the second century AD.

### THE "GOLDEN THREAD"

The Bible has two principal divisions, Hebrew Scriptures and Christian Scriptures, traditionally known as the Old and New Testaments. *Testament* doesn't often crop up in everyday conversation. A better word might be *covenant*, a solemn agreement between two parties. In Scripture, the parties involved are nearly always God and God's people. Covenant appears 289 times in the *New American Bible*. From Genesis to Revelation, covenant is the golden thread weaving in and out through the Bible's many books.

The Church has long encouraged us to seek a broader, deeper understanding of biblical writings, what Scripture scholars call the sense of Scripture. When we look at covenant that way, it becomes obvious that God has always desired humanity to enter freely into an ongoing relationship of love with him. As Catholics, we don't take the prehistorical chapters of Genesis (1–11) as literal history. Prehistory is the period before written records when the verification of certain episodes (creation, the flood, the Tower of Babel) is difficult if not impossible to establish. However, great truths that have had profound impact on every generation throughout salvation history are found in these accounts. We learn that creation is good and we were brought into being by a loving God, a God who gifted us with free will—a gift that God never reclaims, even when we misuse it through sin.

We see that God has no interest in a race of robots, pre-programmed creatures who obey him mechanically. God wants his people to choose him freely, serve him without coercion, and love him with open hearts. This is why he enters into covenant relationship with humanity.

The covenant is, first of all, God's gift of love to us. We can enter a covenant with God only because God lovingly and freely offers it to us. Such a covenant was implied at the creation of humanity. We are invited and enabled to respond lovingly and freely to God's offer. A covenant cannot be imposed; it must be freely accepted by both parties. God's proposal of such an agreement, together with his people's acceptance and subsequent attempt to live it, strengthens the golden thread that binds all of

salvation history—Old Testament and New, 2000 BC and AD 100—and is found wherever the Chosen People travel.

### THREE TOWERING FIGURES

One frequent difficulty in reading Scripture, especially the Old Testament, is the vast cast of characters. People come and go at a great rate, many never to appear again. Do we really need to know all these people? Some are relatively unimportant, others are very important, and a few are crucial to our understanding of God's relationship with his people. In the Hebrew Scriptures, three figures loom large:

**Abram.** A nomadic tribal chieftain living in Chaldea (later Babylonia) where the worship of many gods is accepted practice, Abram has no knowledge of a single, all-powerful deity, let alone one with whom he might make a solemn personal agreement. The gods in Abram's world were to be feared, not loved; appeased, not covenanted. So when God asks him to make a mysterious journey, Abram (later Abraham) knows neither the purpose nor the destination. He knows even less about his God who asks it of him.

He may also be preoccupied by a worrisome situation: he has no heir, and he and his wife, Sarai, are beyond child-bearing years. But God says, "Look up at the sky and count the stars, if you can. Just so...will your descendants be....I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land as a possession" (Genesis 15:5–7).

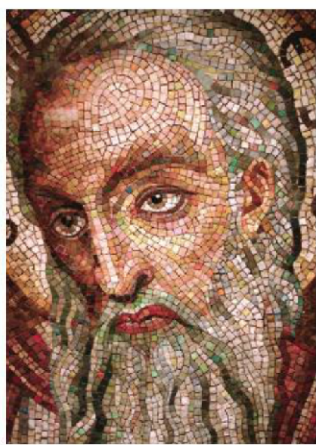
"On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram" (Genesis 15:18). And the golden thread of covenant begins to weave its way through biblical history.

**Moses.** Six centuries pass before the second major character in the covenant saga takes center stage, floating downstream in a basket, a wailing infant whose mother is trying to save him from the Egyptians who have been ordered to kill male Hebrew infants. Plucked from the river by Pharaoh's daughter, he is named Moses.

Moses is raised in two worlds. At the request of Pharaoh's daughter, his early childhood is spent among the Hebrews. Probably in his early teens, he is taken to the Egyptian court and given a fine education. His future is bright until he murders an overbearing overseer. When his crime is detected, he flees into the Arabian desert and there meets God in a burning bush. God has a burning desire: to get his enslaved people out of Egypt under

Moses' leadership. Moses doesn't think he fits the job description, but he does, having been raised with one foot in Hebrew culture, the other in Egyptian.

Like Abraham before him, Moses accepts God's call and walks into the spotlight where he will star in the greatest event of the Old Testament epic, the Exodus. *Exodus* means "departure," and the opening chapters of the Book of Exodus record the departure, probably in the thirteenth century BC, of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage. Once more, the golden thread surfaces



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in the biblical fabric—at Mount Sinai, where Moses again meets God in fire, this time on a mountaintop. God proposes his covenant in all its splendor, formulating one of the most extraordinary codes of ethics and morals in the ancient world. At its heart lie the Ten Commandments or Decalogue, but these famous precepts aren't God's entire message. All that is related to Moses will come to be known as the Law.

When Moses brings God's covenant proposal before the people, they respond enthusiastically, "All that the LORD has said, we will hear and do" (Exodus 24:7), thereby ratifying the agreement. Moses returns with this news to God on the mountain, but before he can return, the Israelites have constructed a golden calf and already fallen away from the pact that demands total allegiance to a single god. Such idolatry will plague their observance of the covenant and tarnish the golden thread throughout Israelite history. When, after Moses' death, they're settled in the land promised to Abraham, the gods of their pagan neighbors repeatedly become their downfall as living in covenant with a single god proves difficult. As later Hebrew writers understood this tendency, such idolatrous sins draw God's displeasure in the form of invasions of stronger cultures whose people raid and plunder at will, resulting in the Israelites' call for a king to lead and defend them.

**David.** The first such king, Saul, fails to live up to God's expectations, so another is selected to take his place. Enter David, the third towering figure on the Old Testament scene. David, who can be dated with certainty at 1000 BC, is "a man after [God's] own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14). Having conquered Jerusalem and made the city his capital, David proposes to build a house for God there, a temple. In a play on words, however, God proposes to build a house for David, a dynasty, a line of kings. The golden thread takes on new brilliance as God promises David his descendants will remain on his throne forever. One after another, kings of David's lineage succeed to his throne. Not all are good kings. Few even come close. Nevertheless, they are of the Davidic line that is to rule forever.

Forever comes to an abrupt halt in 587 BC with the second greatest event in the Old Testament, the Babylonian Exile. As Nebuchadnezzar's army breaches Jerusalem's walls, Zedekiah, the final Davidic occupant of the throne, after seeing his sons slain before him, is blinded and led into captivity. From their captors' homeland, the surviving Israelites try to make some sense of their situation. Is the covenant dead? Has the golden thread slipped beneath the fabric never to re-emerge? Is the promise to David no more? Other sections of our library will tell us more.

## ISRAEL'S SONGBOOK

Among the writings often referred to as the Wisdom Books, we find the Book of Psalms, the poetry section of the library. This is liturgical writing, for many of the psalms were Israel's hymns, sung in Temple and expressing sentiments ranging from praise and thanksgiving to sorrow and remorse. In Psalm 137, the exiled Israelites cry, "By the rivers of Babylon there we sat weeping when we remembered Zion. On the poplars in its midst we hung up our

## HEBREW SCRIPTURES

*One central theme:*  
Covenant

*Two central events:*  
Exodus - 1250 BC  
Exile - 587 BC

*Three central figures:*  
Abraham - 1850 BC  
Moses - 1250 BC  
David - 1000 BC

*Four groups of books:*  
Pentateuch (Torah)  
Historical  
Prophetic  
Writings

## CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURES

*One central theme:*  
Redemption

*Two central events:*  
Death and  
Resurrection of Jesus

*One central figure:*  
Jesus Christ

*Four types of literature:*  
Gospel  
Epistle (Letter)  
Narrative (Acts)  
Apocalyptic  
(Revelation)

harps....But how could we sing a song of the LORD in a foreign land?" (1–2, 4). Bitterness! Hopelessness! But there is hope. The golden thread, though hidden, is unbroken. God remains faithful to the covenant and holds out hope to his devastated people.

## GOLDEN THREAD AND GREEN SHOOT

We now move to the library section known as the Prophets. Jeremiah, the great prophet in the years immediately prior to the Exile, had warned what failure to return to God and his covenant would mean. Like many before and after him, Jeremiah was met with derision and disregard. The call to be a prophet was usually a summons to trial and affliction.

Who were the prophets? Often, we see them as foretellers of the future, but that wasn't their primary responsibility. They were people called by God, usually to recall the Israelites to their covenant agreement. Frequently, that involved reminders that if the current state of affairs continued, the result would be unpleasant. No one wanted to hear that. A modern American, upon visiting a physician, doesn't want to hear that unless a program of proper nutrition and exercise is undertaken immediately, a heart attack is probable. That kind of forecast doesn't imply the doctor is foretelling the future; it merely means this health-care specialist can put two and two together.

When awful consequences came crashing down on God's people, prophets were often bearers of hopeful tidings. During the exile, with the mighty family tree of David toppled, Jeremiah says, "Days are coming...when I will raise up a righteous branch for David; As king he shall reign and govern wisely, he shall do what is just and right in the land" (Jeremiah 23:5).

The man who holds out the strongest thread of hope to the



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exiled Israelites is Ezekiel who became a prophet in Babylon. Following earlier rebukes to Israel for its transgressions, Ezekiel later speaks soothingly of a wonderful return to the land of promise, “They shall live on the land I gave to Jacob my servant, the land where their ancestors lived; they shall live on it always, they, their children, and their children’s children, with David my servant as their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them. I will multiply them and put my sanctuary among them forever” (Ezekiel 37:25–26).

How will this happen? Who will this be? The concept remains dim and ill-defined. But when Israel returns from captivity and begins to rebuild, there will be increasing speculation on this “righteous branch for David” (Jeremiah 23:5).

In time, this person takes on a more focused description. To succeed to David’s throne, it would have to be a king, probably a strong and good king like David. He would be of David’s tribe, Judah, and David’s hometown, Bethlehem, and commissioned for his task in the manner of Israelite priests, prophets, and kings anointed with holy oil. The Hebrew word for an “anointed one” was *Messiah*. In the Greek of Jesus’ day, the term was *Christos*.

For roughly 500 years, Israel continues to formulate its impression of the coming Messiah, the renewal of David’s line, the fulfillment of the covenant. Our library sketches those years in the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, 1 and 2 Maccabees, and the later prophets.

## THE GOLDEN THREAD MOVES ON

As we enter the New Testament (covenant), the Christian Scriptures of the library, the golden thread moves on. It surfaces at the beginning of Matthew’s Gospel with a lengthy genealogy. Matthew, unique in writing for a Christian community composed largely of converts from Judaism, begins his account of Jesus: “The genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (1:1).

In one opening shot, Matthew presents Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah. He positions him in the line of towering figures to whom covenant promises were made: Abraham and David—but no Moses? Matthew wants his audience to see Jesus as the new Moses. Thus, he alone tells of Jesus being saved while infants all around him are being slaughtered just as Moses was saved while other Hebrew boys died. Only Matthew informs us of the Holy Family’s trek to Egypt. Jesus will come forth from there in the same manner Moses did. Only in Matthew is Jesus’ most famous sermon, which deepens and broadens the requirements of the covenant, situated on a hillside or mount just like Moses on Sinai. This time, it’s done on Jesus’ authority, equating him with God.

Matthew’s version of Jesus’ ancestry is stylized: “the total number of generations from Abraham to David is fourteen generations; from David to the Babylonian exile, fourteen generations; from the Babylonian exile to the Messiah, fourteen generations” (1:17). Jesus is born in David’s city, Bethlehem, a fact mentioned five times. According to Matthew, Jesus is the anointed one, the Christ, the Messiah, the son of David, the one who will fulfill the promise made to that great king. Throughout his Gospel, Matthew maintains the kingdom as a major theme,

showing through references to the Hebrew Scriptures that David’s line will continue forever. Jesus will be King of Kings in an eternal kingdom where all those covenanted to him and his father will dwell forever. The promise is fulfilled. That’s the gospel truth.

There are three more Gospels in our library: Mark, Luke, and John. Reading them all provides us with four distinctive perspectives on Jesus and proclamations of the gospel (good news): the Messiah has come and, with him, salvation for those who live in

covenant with him! The golden thread still gleams as Jesus draws his inner circle around him for the Last Supper. Near the end of the meal, raising his cup of wine, he surveys them lovingly and announces, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which will be shed for you” (Luke 22:20).

The full length of the golden thread still hasn’t spun from the spool. As followers of Jesus fan out around the Mediterranean, great missionaries like Paul work to keep the fledgling Christian communities faithful to this new covenant not an easy task in a first-century world lacking in rapid transportation and efficient communication. The result is a flurry of letters, some that are preserved for us in our library. Paul, John, James, Peter, Jude, and others write to one or another of these young churches to explain, expound, upbraid, uphold, and smooth the way for the golden thread as it winds through new territory that will ultimately take it all over the globe.

Where does the golden thread end? Actually, we have the same end: heaven, where we’ll live forever covenanted to our God. The final book in our library fairly glows with heavenly light. Here, in veiled and symbolic terminology, are the apocalyptic visions of the Book of Revelation. Haunting and bewildering, these visions show the golden thread resting at last at the throne of God.

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