

## ***Why Read the Bible?***

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Why do we read the Bible? What *is* the Bible? These are the questions I want to address in these pages. Usually, when we want to know what a book is and whether we should read it, we look at the first part, and following this logic we would look at the first chapters of Genesis. We will return to Genesis before we are done, but that is not where we will begin.

There is a way in which the first book of the Bible is Ecclesiastes. No one would read the Bible unless he desired to know something; no one would desire to know something unless he had a question; and no book in the Bible states the questions of our existence as clearly as Ecclesiastes. “Vanity of vanities,” says the first line of the book, “vanity of vanities! All is vanity.”<sup>1</sup>

The speaker in Ecclesiastes is Qoheleth, whose name means “the preacher”. He is an outstanding poet, a teacher of morality, and successful in many of life’s ventures, but his greatest talent was that he could ask penetrating questions. Why is it that my generation comes and goes, and the world is still the same? The sun still shines as it always did, the rains come and fall into the rivers, which flow into the ocean, which evaporates into the clouds, which makes the rain, and around and around it goes. Why does the world just go on and on, as if I and my generation meant nothing? Do we mean anything?<sup>2</sup>

Why is it that pleasure doesn’t satisfy? Qoheleth tried every pleasure under the sun, from wealth to wine, from food to music, and he testifies that no amount of pleasure fills a man up. At the end of the day, something is still missing.<sup>3</sup>

Why is it that a wise man dies the same way as a fool?<sup>4</sup> For that matter, why is it that a man dies the same way as an animal?<sup>5</sup> Isn’t it better to be a man than to be an animal? Isn’t it better to be wise than to be foolish? Why do all come to the same end?

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<sup>1</sup> Eccl. 1:2.

<sup>2</sup> Eccl. 1:3-11.

<sup>3</sup> Eccl. 2:1-11.

<sup>4</sup> Eccl. 2:12-17.

<sup>5</sup> Eccl. 3:19-21.

Why is it that a man can work all his life to amass a great stock of wealth, and then when he dies it is enjoyed by someone else, who didn't work for it, who may not even be his own child?<sup>6</sup> Why is it that there is corruption even in the courthouse, which is supposed to administer justice?<sup>7</sup> Why is it that we see wicked men living long, prosperous lives, while we see righteous men who die young?

In other words, Qoheleth is asking, What is God thinking?

The very fact that we have so many questions is one of the empty realities of life. We desire to know what God's master plan is, and why the world seems so empty, and what will come of it all, but such exalted truths are beyond our reach. God, says Qoheleth, "has put eternity into man's mind, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from beginning to the end."<sup>8</sup>

One reason Qoheleth wrote was to respond to the book of Proverbs, or at least to the tradition represented by that book.<sup>9</sup> Proverbs urges that the answer to life's problems is to acquire God's wisdom—to think in tune with God. "The Lord by wisdom founded the earth," says Proverbs, "by understanding he established the heavens."<sup>10</sup> If we open our minds to God's wisdom, then we will understand the principles by which the earth was founded, and penetrate the very creation of the heavens. The book of Proverbs portrays Wisdom as a person who speaks, and says of herself:<sup>11</sup>

The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. . . . When he established the heavens, I was there. . . . when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master workman; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always."

God's wisdom is eternal, just as God is eternal. Wisdom was God's "master workman" when He created the heavens and the earth in the beginning. If we acquire God's wisdom, then we too will

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<sup>6</sup> Eccl. 2:18-21, 6:1-6.

<sup>7</sup> Eccl. 3:16.

<sup>8</sup> Eccl. 3:11.

<sup>9</sup> Such at least is the best guess of current scholarship.

<sup>10</sup> Prov. 3:19.

<sup>11</sup> Prov. 8:22-31.

understand God's eternal purpose in creating and the plan He has planned from all eternity for mankind.<sup>12</sup>

But here we encounter Qoheleth's objection, or rather his observation: God "has put eternity into man's mind, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from beginning to the end."<sup>13</sup> How are we to acquire this wisdom, when it is in God? When Moses asked to see God, the Lord granted him to see His "back," but He warned him: "You cannot see my face; for no man shall see me and live."<sup>14</sup> God is infinite, and His wisdom is infinite. If we were to see God, if we were to know His mind and understand His thought, it would be too much for our frail nature to bear, like an owl staring into the sun.<sup>15</sup> As an old proverb has it, "He who is a searcher of majesty will be overwhelmed by glory."<sup>16</sup> The problem seems insoluble.

The story of the Bible is the story of God's plan to answer this problem. Already in the Garden of Eden, God establishes the first couple in friendship with Himself, and walks with them intimately.<sup>17</sup> But Adam sinned, and immediately he felt that he had lost intimacy with God, and he was afraid.<sup>18</sup> He was cast out of the Garden, and his children have wandered in exile ever since. Hence we find Cain complaining that he will wander far from God's face.<sup>19</sup> When it became clear that we of ourselves only fall further and further away from God's face in a never-ending spiral, God Himself intervened by choosing Abraham to be the father of a nation through which "all the nations of the earth shall be blessed."<sup>20</sup> This nation took shape under Moses, who received God's promise that, if they were faithful, they would enjoy God's presence in their midst,

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<sup>12</sup> Eph. 3:11.

<sup>13</sup> Eccl. 3:11.

<sup>14</sup> Exod. 33:20.

<sup>15</sup> See St. Thomas Aquinas's comment in *Summa Theologia* 1.1.5, ad 1.

<sup>16</sup> Prov. 25:27 in the Vulgate. The Hebrew is somewhat obscure and is rendered variously by different translators.

<sup>17</sup> See Gen. 3:8.

<sup>18</sup> Gen 3:10.

<sup>19</sup> Gen. 4:14.

<sup>20</sup> Gen. 12:1-3.

in the Tabernacle, and the abundant land which had been promised to Abraham.<sup>21</sup>

Notice that these promises are parallel to the blessings of Eden: intimacy with God and habitation of a blessed land. God has purposefully given Israel blessings like those He had given all men in the Garden, so that His chosen people might act as a channel to re-bestow these blessings on all mankind.

In time, God chose a king for His people, David, “a man after [God’s] own heart.”<sup>22</sup> David received further promises from God, namely that David’s descendants would always sit on the throne of David; that one of David’s sons would build a house for God; and that the Lord would deliver the nations into the hands of Israel under the Davidic kingship.<sup>23</sup> In other words, having chosen Israel to act as a conduit of His blessings for the world, God chose David and his sons as his instruments for spreading the blessings of Israel beyond Israel’s own borders. If Israel is the chosen instrument, David’s house is the cutting edge of that instrument.

But the people of Israel were not faithful to God. Despite repeated warnings, they persisted in worshipping other gods, in oppressing the poor, and in every other kind of immorality we find among us today. The punishment for this unfaithfulness came piece by piece: first, Israel lost whatever power it had gained over the surrounding nations; then the very northern tip of Israel was conquered and its people taken into exile; not long after, the same fate overtook the entire northern part of the kingdom; finally, the southern part of the kingdom and even Jerusalem was conquered, and the people together with their davidic king were led into exile. The Garden of Eden was played out once again, as Israel’s sins lost for them the double gifts of God’s presence and the promised land.

It seemed as if all were lost. Mankind stands in the most desperate need of God’s wisdom, which requires intimacy with God. Through sin, we lost these gifts once in the Garden of Eden, and then Israel, the vessel chosen for restoring the blessings to us, lost them again. Again and again, God has tried to overcome the distance between us and the infinite God, to be close to us so that we might be formed in wisdom by Him, but as many times as He has come to us, we have rejected Him. This is the desolate situation Qoheleth describes.

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<sup>21</sup> Exod. 19:31; see esp. 19:3-6.

<sup>22</sup> 1Sam. 13:14.

<sup>23</sup> 2Sam 7:4-16, seen together with Psalm 2, the "royal enthronement" psalm.

Now it is clear that we need more than God's wisdom. We need to be formed within by His wisdom, but that cannot happen as long as our sin stands between us and God. We not only need light, but also redemption.

God had made promises to Abraham, and to Moses, and to David, and He did not turn back on these promises, despite all our sins. He remembered the covenant He had made with our fathers, and, through the prophets, He promised to restore Israel's blessings; because Israel's blessings were fundamentally the same as those originally intended for all men, the prophecies about the restoration of Israel were also prophecies of a universal savior. When the time was ripe, He looked again to the house of David, the anointed edge of the sword of God. At this point, we can pick up the story at the beginning of John's Gospel. Let us read John's prologue together slowly:

**In the beginning was the Word.** The words "In the beginning" take us all the way back to the very beginning, to the first line of Genesis 1 and the story of creation. Our attention is brought back to the original state of mankind and the blessings God gave to our first parents. "The Word" recalls the creative speech of God whereby He spoke, and it was. But what is translated here as "word" is *logos* in Greek, which has a broader meaning than our English term "word." *Logos* does mean "word," but it also means "interior thought," or "rational account." These more interior meanings of *logos* open up onto the discussion of "wisdom" in Proverbs, where we are also told that God's wisdom was "in the beginning." God's *logos* and His "wisdom" are the same.

**And the Word was with God, and the Word was God.**<sup>24</sup> Proverbs portrayed wisdom as a person, using a literary device we call "personification." But John takes us beyond literary devices by telling us that the Word *is* a person, namely God Himself. Initially, this reinforces the difficulty we encountered at first: how can we acquire this wisdom for ourselves, if the word or wisdom we need is God Himself? Who could comprehend the infinite God?

**All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.**<sup>25</sup> This parallels the statements in Proverbs we saw earlier: "The Lord by wisdom founded the earth," and "by understanding he established the heavens."

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**In him was life.**<sup>26</sup> It was by His wisdom that God gave the gift of life to Adam and Eve,  
<sup>24</sup> John 1:1.

<sup>25</sup> John 1:3.

<sup>26</sup> John 1:4.

symbolized by the Tree of Life. It is God's word or wisdom that holds the answer to Qoheleth's pressing questions about death. Why do the wise and the foolish, men and animals all die the same way? Wisdom offers "life".

**And the life was the light of men.**<sup>27</sup> God's wisdom was the original "blueprint" of creation; His Word was the "master plan." It was when we departed from the Father's plan for us, in the Garden, that death entered the world, and somewhere along the path of our subsequent straying further and further from that plan, we lost the truth as well.<sup>28</sup> The only way to recover the life Adam forfeited and to regain our access to fundamental truths is to return to the blueprint—to be re-molded to the Word. Only in the Word can we find light and life.<sup>29</sup>

What the Gospel has said so far highlights the continuity of John's insight with the earlier author of Proverbs. It reinforces the desirability of grasping God's own inner Word in order to answer the fundamental questions about our existence. Our brief overview of salvation history showed us that **The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world** repeatedly to save us. **He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own home, to his chosen people, and his own people received him not.**<sup>30</sup>

Drastic action is necessary if mankind is to be saved, and that is what we find in verse 14: **And the Word became flesh.** We have to read that several times before it can sink in: **The Word became flesh.** God's inner wisdom, which is in fact God Himself, became a man like one of us. He **dwelt among us**, so that all could interact with Him daily. Ordinary human beings could not only see the face of God, but could even feel His hands and smell the sweat of His labor. There amidst the realities of everyday human existence, poor and uneducated men **beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.** This is what the Church Fathers called the divine "condescension" or coming-down of God's wisdom. **No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known** (v. 18).

Our problem seemed insoluble because the answer is incomprehensible: God became a

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<sup>27</sup> John 1:4.

<sup>28</sup> See Rom. 1:19-32.

<sup>29</sup> See St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, ch. 4.

<sup>30</sup> John 1:9-11.

man, Jesus. He chose twelve men who were with Him from the beginning of His public life to be witnesses of what they had seen in Him, and that He was ending the punishment of the twelve tribes of Israel.<sup>31</sup> The story of Eden was played out again as we rejected Him, and He suffered under Pontius Pilate, died, and was buried. But unlike Adam and unlike Israel, Jesus is God, so His death was not a defeat but the victory which redeems us from our sin. He broke down the dividing wall between us and God. On the third day He rose again from the dead and ascended into heaven, and from there we believe that He will come again one day to judge the living and the dead.

But before He left, He promised that He will be with us always, to the end of the ages.<sup>32</sup> He gave His own Spirit to His Church, uniting her to Himself as His own body, so that His presence continues among us through the Church.<sup>33</sup> And to renew His life and presence within the Church, He gave her two special gifts. First and most importantly, He gave her the Eucharist, which contains His entire self, body and blood, soul and divinity. By receiving the Eucharist, we are molded to Christ, molded to His passion, death, and resurrection, formed in our inmost selves by Him who is the Wisdom of God. By this dissolution of our false, sinful selves, we regain our true selves, as we are re-made to the image of the One in Whose image we were made in the beginning.

But Christ's other gift to the Church was the Bible. In Mass, we are nourished at the two tables of the Word and the Eucharist; at the end of a reading from Scripture, the lector says: "The Word of the Lord." So what does "the word of the Lord" mean? The General Instruction for the Ritual of the Mass, which is the handbook of rules and explanations for the Mass put out by the Vatican, says that "...in the readings...God speaks with His people, opens up the mystery of redemption and salvation, and offers spiritual nourishment; and Christ Himself is present through His word in the midst of the faithful."<sup>34</sup> The Bible is God Himself speaking and present. The Second Vatican Council explains it this way:

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<sup>31</sup> See 1John 1:1-3.

<sup>32</sup> Matt. 28:20.

<sup>33</sup> Eph 1:20-23, 5:22-32.

<sup>34</sup> *GIRM* 55.

[I]n Sacred Scripture...the marvelous “condescension” of eternal wisdom is clearly shown.... For the words of God, expressed in human language, have become like unto human speech, just as the Word of the eternal Father, when he took on himself the flesh of human weakness, became like unto human beings.<sup>35</sup>

We should back up and approach this idea slowly. If I say to you, “I love the Bible”, these are the words of Jeremy. Why are these the words of Jeremy? Well, I can think of two reasons why: first, Jeremy is the one who shaped those words. Jeremy decided what they would be, and then Jeremy used his mouth, his tongue, and his lips to speak them. The second reason is that Jeremy intended these words to express what is in his mind. These words are caused by Jeremy for the purpose of expressing what is in Jeremy’s mind.

Now for the words of God. When Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River, the heavens were opened and a voice said to him, “This is my beloved Son.” (Mat. 3:17) The words “This is my beloved Son” are obviously the words of God. God caused those words to take shape in the air, and caused them for the purpose of expressing what is in His mind about Jesus. So they are words of God.

But words don’t have to come out of thin air to be words of God. In the case of Scripture, God caused it to happen that, when men wrote and intended the words to express what was in their minds, God also intended what they wrote to express *His* mind. Here is what the Second Vatican Council says about it:

In composing the sacred Books, God chose and employed certain men, who, while engaged in this task, made full use of their faculties and powers, so that, with God himself acting in them and through them, they as true authors committed to writing everything and only those things that he wanted written. Therefore, since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers should be regarded as asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that we must acknowledge the Books of Scripture as teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error the truth that God wished to be recorded in the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation.<sup>36</sup>

In Scripture, we have another kind of “incarnation” of the Word, of God’s Wisdom. We sometimes hear that, despite the fact that it contains a library of different kinds of books, Scripture is really one book because it has one Author, namely God. The truth is more radical than this: Scripture is one book because all of it, from Genesis 1:1 to Revelation 22:21, utters one Word.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> *Dei Verbum* 11, in Dean P. Bechard, ed., *The Scripture Documents: An Anthology of Official Catholic Teachings* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 25.

<sup>36</sup> Bechard, *Documents*, 24.

<sup>37</sup> See the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 102.

This is the real force behind that famous quotation from St. Jerome, "Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ."<sup>38</sup> This "incarnation" continues the mission Christ undertook when He became a man for us: it brings God's wisdom within our reach by clothing it in a human form.

It is important to remember that Christ entrusted this mission to the Church, which is His mystical body and His continued presence on earth, and so the Scriptures are first of all given to the Church. But as a good mother, the Church in turn gives the Bible to us to nourish us. She encourages us to "take up and read."<sup>39</sup>

As long as the Bible just sits on the coffee table, the Wisdom of God remains as far from us as if it were still enclosed in heaven. By *reading* the Bible, we will be shaped interiorly, and our minds will be made like God's own mind, our hearts like God's own heart. By *reading* Scripture, we allow Jesus-as-the-Word to continue His mission in the world by giving us once again the blessings intended for us "in the beginning." This transformation requires that we be *soaked* with the Word of God, inundated with it, filled with it. It needs to be in our memory, and in our imagination, and in our minds, and in every power of our souls. Hearing snippets of Scripture at Mass once a week or even daily will not accomplish this: we have to study, to meditate, to remember, to ponder, in short to *pursue* God's wisdom in every way open to us.

One can see a profound parallel between Scripture and the Eucharist.<sup>40</sup> In each, we meet Christ, the Word; each forms us to Him, although in different ways. The Church gives us the Mass in two indispensable parts, the liturgy of the Word and the liturgy of the Eucharist. The Church offers a plenary indulgence for half an hour of Eucharistic adoration, and offers the same

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<sup>38</sup> This text, from the prologue to Jerome's commentary on Isaiah, is worth quoting in context (PLA 24:17): "[I am] obedient to the precept of Christ, Who said: *Search the Scriptures* (John 5:39); and, *See and you shall find* (Matt. 7:76). Nor shall I with the Jews hear this: *You err, knowing neither the Scriptures nor the power of God* (Matt. 22:29). For if according to the apostle Paul (2Cor. 1:24) Christ is the power of God, and the wisdom of God, and the one who does not the Scriptures, does not know the power of God and His wisdom: ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ." [The translation is my own.]

<sup>39</sup> See the story related by St. Augustine in his *Confessions*, Bk. VIII, ch. XII, regarding his moral struggle and the transformative strength he received when a voice urged him to "take up and read" (*tolle et lege*) from the Bible.

<sup>40</sup> In general, there is a profound connection between Scripture and the liturgy. When the Church compiled the canon, the debate was not directly about whether a given book is "inspired," but about whether a given book can be used in the context of communal worship. In other words, Scripture's function in the Mass is probably what defined the parameters of our Bible, and the Bible in turn finds its most fundamental role in the setting of the Mass. It is in the Mass that we see clearly the intimate connections between Christ, the Church, the Eucharist, and the Word of God.

reward for half an hour of reading Scripture. Scripture and the Eucharist are inseparable, two paths to meeting the Word of God.

This is what Scripture is, and this is why we read the Bible: to meet Jesus.