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I'm Glad You Asked!

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Common Questions
Catholics Have About
the Bible

Fr. Mark R. Pierce

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Dedication

To my students at all levels,
who have been honest enough to have questions
and brave enough to voice them.
Without them *neither* they nor I would have learned much.

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Introduction

My parents were shepherds. Well, they didn't actually raise sheep, but in some ways, they were like the shepherds in the Christmas story from the Gospel of Luke. Minding their own business, the shepherds got a visit from a very talkative angel (complete with a heavenly backup group) who announced that God was coming to live among them as a newborn child in the next town. For my folks, their religious faith seemed quite natural, like breathing. Like the shepherds, their trust in God was bedrock; they never asked questions.

I, however, am an astrologer. Well, not *really*, but in some ways, I'm like the magi in the Nativity story from the Gospel of Matthew, who were astrologers from the East. The magi had a long journey, following a star that faded on them at a critical moment. They studied a lot, asked questions, and depended on others for directions. I don't mean to sound overly dramatic, but though I received my faith from my folks, unlike them I've always asked, "Why?" and "How?" and "Where does it say that?" I must have driven them nuts. But they put up with it, out of their love for God . . . and me.

It seems that there are many more astrologers in the world than shepherds these days. Young people often drop by my office or send me an e-mail and ask "Why?" and "How?" and "Where does it say that?" about faith. If it drives me a little nuts, it's only fair. Most of the questions I hear are about how to read the Bible, how to make sense of hard-to-understand Scripture

verses, and how to explain our faith to non-Catholic friends. I've gathered sixty of those questions, grouped them into those three categories, and tried my best to make sense of them, one astrologer to another. I'd be pleased if they help you reach your destination.

Section 1: FAQs About Using the Bible

“This will change your life!” How often have you heard that line before? A new cell phone plan, the choice of a college, psychic hotlines—lots of things get pitched to us in such breathless tones. And we have all been disappointed. No wonder we’ve all become a little suspicious of sales talk.

So what makes me think I’m justified in pitching the Bible to you this way? Well, exhibit A would be the large number of people, past and present, who swear their lives have indeed been changed by reading it. I am one of them. I was a little late catching on, but I have come to see that God’s Word is powerful, life-changing stuff. I bet someone close to you can give her or his own testimonial. (Hint: think of the person who may have given you this book or who assigned [sigh!] you to read it.)

But, truth be told, for every person who finds the Bible engrossing the first time he or she picks it up, there are bunches of folks who initially find it mystifying. And then there are others who, when they’re being honest, admit they just find it boring. In my experience, the problem is not with the Bible itself, or even the motivation of the reader, but rather is a matter of “mechanics.” Beginners get their hopes smashed because they don’t know where to begin reading the Bible or what to make of what they find when they do.

I’d like to help you avoid that. This first section of this book is a guide to cracking open this big and sometimes intimidating thing called the Bible by way of sixteen questions and answers. Most of these concerns come from actual young people, though I confess to having made up a couple of the questions just to get some things off my chest. You should be able to skip

around and read the questions you're interested in and ignore the rest without too much damage to your train of thought.

But before you plow into the questions themselves, you might pause and consider the marvel that is writing itself. We take reading and writing for granted, but putting down letters to make words was a big step forward for our ancestors. It allowed them (and allows us) to capture thoughts, events, and experiences so they can be preserved, revisited, or shared. Now some writing is just a way of holding on to data—a phone book or a dictionary, for example. But sometimes we express ourselves through these little symbols so we can touch people far away (in distance or time, or both) or so they can touch us. Writing and reading is often about relationship.

So when you read the Bible, I hope you have a strong desire to be in relationship with God. We people of faith believe that God authored the Bible—but, as I will explain later, not that God actually wrote it down and faxed it to us. Through the Bible, God wants to be known by us, wants to be encountered. And that, my friend, is why the Bible is well worth every moment of time we can give to it.

How do I get started?

The first time a Bible is put into a person's hands, it's likely quite easy for him or her to make certain assumptions about it—certain *wrong* assumptions. The thinking goes something like this: “Hmm . . . printed pages bound together, cover with a title on it. It looks like a book. The Bible must be a book.” But with that understandable conclusion comes certain expectations—the Bible must have a tidy list of returning characters, an orderly progression in time, a single point of view, neat transitions, and helpful summaries for the inattentive reader. I regret to have to be the one to tell you this, but as far as the Bible is concerned, none of these are the case. The Bible isn't a textbook or a romance novel; in fact, it isn't even a book so much as a library, a collection of writings bound together.

Walk into your local library and ask the person at the desk, “Where should I begin?” and she or he will likely smile and start lobbing questions at you: “What are you looking for? What interests you? Do you enjoy history? poetry? philosophy? law? imaginative stories?” Once you tell the person what you are after, she or he can direct you where to find it. A library has it all, and in many ways, so does the Bible. Despite its appearances, the Bible is not a book in the usual sense, but a collection of writings that share a central concern.

This may explain why so many people who are determined to read the Bible start out bravely with Genesis only to run out of gas somewhere in Exodus (if not earlier). They have slipped from a part of the library featuring engaging stories about a remarkable family's escape from slavery to a section that offers chapter after chapter of rules. It's a rough transition.

So the place to start is where your interests lie. Here's a list of entry points for the beginner—a sampling of the kinds of writing you will find in the Bible, in some of their most attractive appearances:

- **Exodus, chapters 1–20:** the dramatic narrative of God's leading the Hebrew slaves to freedom and relationship; the core story of Judaism
- **Second Samuel:** a sober and spicy chronicle of court intrigue during the reign of the great Jewish hero and ancestor of Jesus, David
- **Tobit:** a romantic tale written to encourage the reader to trust in God's watchful care
- **Jonah:** a delightful parable poking fun at us religious people when we think everyone needs a change of heart but us
- **Mark:** the shortest of the Gospels, written to Christians who are finding following Jesus very challenging
- **First Corinthians:** Paul's address to "baby Christians" who are struggling with familiar problems—group squabbles, sex, and worries about what happens when we die
- **First Thessalonians:** maybe the oldest Christian writing in the Bible, encouraging a young church in the face of opposition
- **James:** wise coaching for living the Christian life

Why is the Bible so big?

That is a great question, and one I hope you will continue to ask in all your wondering about and seeking after God. The Bible is big because God is big. The flip side is that we human creatures are small (not small as in unimportant, but small as in limited in our ability to get our heads around some things.)

In part the Bible is so large due to *what it tries to communicate*. Explaining a big thing to someone whose understanding is limited sometimes requires lots of words. Then some things are beyond words altogether. How would you attempt to explain the color green to someone blind from birth or the scent of a rose to someone who cannot smell? As helpful as they are, if words can't manage such relatively simple tasks, how will they manage to capture and contain the One who invented green and created a rose's smell?

The Bible itself says as much. In the full version of the Ten Commandments, the Israelites were told not even to try to make an artistic image of God (see Exodus 20:4). Later Moses asked to see God, and God consented—sheltering Moses in a niche in the mountain, then covering the opening with his hand while he passed by: “Then I will remove my hand, so that you may see my back; but my face is not to be seen” (Exodus 33:23). God is not being difficult; it's just hard to drink from a fire hose.

Another thing that makes the Bible big is *how God has chosen to communicate*. Think of the difference between watching a baseball game and perusing the box-score summary, or between viewing an episode of your favorite show and settling for the thumbnail sketch in *TV Guide*. In both cases, the essential information is there, but the very reasons you would tune in to

watch—the suspense, the drama, the excitement—are missing. I suppose God *could* have chosen to speak to us via to-do lists, bumper stickers, and sound bytes, but the Scriptures come to us as narratives, poetry, letters, legal codes, and parables because these types of writing do better in drawing us in and making us feel that we are being addressed. Remember, in the end, God’s library is less about learning information and more about being in relationship.

So remember that the Bible is big because God speaks to us as he spoke to Moses—at length, in a way we can understand. And the Bible is big because God wants to draw us in to the story as participants, not just observers. And both of those things require lots and lots of words.

Why are Catholic Bibles bigger than Protestant Bibles?

As helpful as it might have been, Jesus didn't leave us a reading list. The question of how many books are received as God's written Word has divided Christians for centuries. Though we all have the same twenty-seven writings about the saving work of Jesus (the New Testament), complications arise with the texts we received from the Jewish people. Protestant Christians have thirty-nine books in their Old Testament, Catholics have forty-six, and Orthodox Christians add one or two more.

The biblical library came together slowly and a little untidily. By the end of the second century, a broad consensus on the Church's guiding writings had been reached (with a quibble over one book or another). But this general agreement came apart in the sixteenth century, when Martin Luther placed seven of the Jewish writings that the Church had been using in a separate category, not on the same level as the rest. Other Protestant reformers followed Luther's lead, and in time some publishers stopped printing those writings in their Bibles altogether.* So if a Lutheran friend asks, "Why did you Catholics add those books to the Bible?" it is appropriate to politely respond, "Why did Luther choose to remove them?"

* The books are Judith, Tobit, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Sirach, Wisdom, and Baruch. Protestants place them in a section called the Apocrypha (from a Greek word for "hidden") with other ancient Jewish sacred writings considered not equal to other books in the Bible. The Catholic term for these same seven, fully accepted as God's inspired Word, is *Deuterocanonicals* (from a pair of Greek words meaning "second canon"). All officially approved Catholic Bibles include these books.

How is the Bible organized?

It may come as a surprise, especially if you just spent ten minutes searching for a certain passage, but there really is an order to the Bible. It's just not an order that makes automatic sense to modern people. If it were up to us, we might arrange the thing alphabetically (from Amos to Zechariah) or chronologically (in the order of the event or times being discussed). But because of the kind of thing it is, the biblical library is put together more like a cookbook.

Cookbooks aren't arranged alphabetically, but rather by the course of the meal. First come all the drink and punch recipes, then a section with appetizer ideas, then another just for soups, and so on. To find a particular recipe, you could search the index (hoping you have the name of the dish right), or you could just ask, "What sort of food is this?" and then start paging through that particular section until you find the recipe you want.

If you're not into cookbooks, think about a newspaper. On the front page, you will usually find stories reporting the most important events of the day. The author's aim is to inform. Deeper into the paper, you'll come across a section headed "Editorial" or "Opinion." Here the individual authors are trying to persuade you to see things in a new way (well, in his or her way). Keep paging and you will find a sports section, the comics page, and lots and lots of space dedicated to want ads. The newspaper editor could have chosen to scatter these different types of writing throughout the paper, but it is easier for readers to have the same kinds of writings lumped together.

In a similar way, the books in your typical Christian Bible are lumped into smaller collections. The first five (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) are a special group with its own name: the Pentateuch (which is also called the Torah). Then there's a gathering of books that provide a "God's-eye-view" of what happened when the Chosen People got their own land: the Historical books. Two other collections follow: the Wisdom books and the Prophets. All together, these make up one wing of the biblical library and tell the story of the Jewish people before the coming of Christ—what Christians call the Old Testament. The second wing of the library, the New Testament, begins with four tellings of Jesus's story: the Gospels. The Acts of the Apostles follows, which is the story of Jesus's followers after his Resurrection and Ascension. Then come twenty-one letters by a variety of authors (many by Saint Paul) and then a book of Christian prophecy and encouragement called the Revelation to John.

So when you think about the Bible's organization, don't think of the alphabet or historical order. Think of a cookbook or a newspaper. Like them, the Bible is organized by the kind of writing found in each book.

With so many kinds of Bibles, how do I choose one?

Selecting a Bible requires the same savvy you use when purchasing clothes. Enter the Gap and say, “I’d like some jeans,” and the clerk will bombard you with questions: “Do you prefer straight leg, boot leg, relaxed fit, regular fit, stonewashed, distressed, regular fly, or button fly?” Before you choose, you need to become familiar with the possibilities. Similarly, God’s Word comes packaged in a variety of ways that aim to reach a variety of readers.

Your standard Bible will provide all seventy-three books of God’s library between two covers, perhaps with a smattering of extras—cross-references or brief introductions to the individual books.

Add to your standard Bible longer book introductions, lengthy footnotes, sidebar comments on difficult points in the text, maps, and so on, and you have a study Bible. Because, in most cases, the Bible has not been a large part of our growing up, extra help from a study Bible is something I am big on for Catholics.

Devotional Bibles begin again with your standard Bible and often add some of the basic features of a study Bible (maps and introductions). Because this type of Bible is intended to encourage the spiritual growth of the reader, it also includes questions for applying the text to your own life, prayer helps, and even outlines for small-group study. There are devotional Bibles for just about every subgroup and taste: men, women, couples, singles, mothers, teenagers, and so on.

What's the best Bible to have?

This may seem like a less-than-helpful answer, but there is no *best* Bible, just Bibles that are better or worse for certain people and certain tasks.

The biblical books were originally written in languages offered by no high school language department I know of: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. So the Bibles we read in English were developed by teams of scholarly translators. If you've studied Spanish or French, you know that there are many ways to translate words from one language to another, with no one of them automatically "the best." Because of this, I steer people away from older English versions (a biblical word for "translations") like the King James Bible or the Douay-Rheims Confraternity Bible. These were very fine Bibles in their time—and can still be beautiful to read—but they were translated nearly four centuries ago, and English has changed a lot since then. When people complain about biblical *thee's* and *thou's*, they aren't really criticizing God's Word, but an outdated translation. For your main Bible, I would suggest you get one translated in the last thirty years.

But locating the best Bible for you also depends on what you want to do with it. For serious study or work in school, a more literal, word-for-word translation is probably better. It may be tougher to understand at first, but the ambiguities and rough spots in the originals are left to stand as they are. For prayer and devotional reading (and with beginners), a freer, thought-for-thought translation is often better, giving the main points without bogging you down along the way. Then there's the matter of biblical bells and whistles—the options and add-ons we talked

about in question 5: introductions to the writings, notes, maps, and study questions. Try to be excited by all the variety.

Big-time Bible readers usually have more than one Bible on their shelf. But if you locked me in my closet and demanded a recommendation, I'd steer high school students to an edition of the New American Bible (NAB) or the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) packaged as *The Catholic Youth Bible*[®] (Saint Mary's Press, 2005). Both are moderately word-for-word translations with all seventy-three Catholic books, and *THE CATHOLIC YOUTH BIBLE* includes many study and devotional helps. For younger readers, I'd suggest the Catholic edition* of the Good News Translation (GNT). *Breakthrough! The Bible for Young Catholics* (Saint Mary's Press, 2006) is a GNT that contains many study and devotional aids.

* Catholic editions contain the extra Old Testament books that Catholic readers will want to have. See question 3 in this section.