

Preparing for the Journey:

Basic Information



Focus Question

How should I approach the study of the Old Testament?

Chapter Overview

Introduction

Essential Preparation for Studying the Old Testament

Section 1

How the Church Interprets the Inspired Writings

Section 2

Classifying and Arranging the Old Testament Books

Section 3

How Important Is the Old Testament in the
Life of the Church?



Introduction

ESSENTIAL PREPARATION FOR STUDYING THE OLD TESTAMENT

Main Idea

The many books and stories of the Old Testament help you to see the loving relationship between God and his People throughout history.

An ancient Chinese philosopher named Lao Tzu once said, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” This wise saying applies to any journey you make in life. In order to complete the journey successfully, you need to know basic information at the outset. You need to prepare and to gather all the necessary supplies.

Similarly, it is important to prepare before you delve into a serious course of study. Before you can properly start, you need answers to many questions. If these questions are not answered at least briefly, it will be hard to keep your mind on the task. The questions will only keep nagging you. Furthermore, if you don’t approach Bible study with the appropriate background information, you may easily get overwhelmed or sidetracked. You may give up and never complete your journey.

Most importantly, you must always keep in mind that the Bible is different from any other book. Since the Bible is the inspired Word of God, it “must be read and interpreted in the sacred spirit in which it was written” (*Dei Verbum*, 12 § 3). That said, let’s begin with some basic preparation and background information. Take some notes as you read the section. If you have additional questions about the Bible, record them in a notebook or journal.

What Is the Old Testament?

This may seem like a simple question, but actually it isn’t. Catholics and other Christians call the first part of their Bible the “Old Testament” in relation to the “New Testament,” which has as its central object Jesus Christ (see *CCC*,

NOTE TAKING

Identifying Main Details. Copy the chart here. As you read, fill in basic information about the Old Testament.

BASIC INFORMATION ABOUT THE OLD TESTAMENT	
What is the Old Testament?	
Who is God?	
What is the divine-human relationship like?	

124; “testament” is a synonym for “covenant” [CCC, Glossary; see Chapter 3, Introduction]). Jews (known earlier as Israelites or Hebrews) prefer the term *Hebrew Bible* because they do not use the New Testament.

When Jews refer to the Hebrew Bible and Christians refer to the Old Testament, they are basically talking about the same thing; however, there are differences. Jews recognize twenty-four books as Holy Scripture. Catholics divide those twenty-four books into thirty-nine books and add seven ancient Jewish books to recognize a total of forty-six books of the Old Testament (forty-five if Jeremiah and Lamentations are counted as one book) and twenty-seven books of the New Testament as part of their **canon** of Scripture. Protestant Christians follow the Jewish canon to recognize thirty-nine books of the Old Testament; they have the same New Testament canon as Catholics.

The Old Testament is really a *collection* of books written over the course of a millennium, roughly between 1000 BC and 150 BC. The books were written predominantly in the Hebrew language. The early Church, however,



The books that form the Bible would have originally been written by hand on scrolls such as these.

canon An official list of books accepted as Holy Scripture.

differed from Judaism in the decision about the canon of the Old Testament. The Church included seven books (Tobit, Judith, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Wisdom, Sirach or Ecclesiasticus, and Baruch) not included in the Hebrew Bible that were mostly written in Greek after 300 BC. These seven books are referred to as **deuterocanonical**—“of the second canon”—to show that they are not accepted in the Jewish canon. There are also deuterocanonical chapters added to the older Hebrew books of Daniel and Esther.

At the time of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, Martin Luther decided to include in the Old Testament only books in the Hebrew Bible. Some Protestant Bibles do print the seven deuterocanonical books, but they include them in a separate section called the **apocrypha**. Protestants often read these books with great interest, and all Christian scholars study them. Nevertheless, you may hear people speak of “Catholic Bibles” and “Protestant Bibles” because of this difference.

Who Is God?

In the Old Testament, the God of the Hebrew people has many names. But the most common name is “YHWH” (pronounced YAH-way and often spelled “Yahweh”), the name that Moses first heard when he was called to be the liberator of God’s People in Egypt (see Exodus 3:14). The non-Hebrew people in the ancient world had their own gods under many different names. For example, Baal was the most popular god of the nearby Canaanites. Baal is mentioned in several places in the Old Testament. (See Chapter 2, Section 2, for more on Baal.)

Although there is some uncertainty about the origins of the name, it seems that the name YHWH is constructed from the basic verb “to be” in Hebrew. YHWH is usually translated as “I am,” but it could also be “I am the God who is” or “I am and will be.” Parts of this name YHWH—like the “iah” in Isaiah and Jeremiah—are in many Hebrew personal names. If these Hebrew names were translated into English, they would sound similar to English

deuterocanonical A term meaning “of the second canon”; designates writings included in the Catholic Old Testament but not in the Hebrew Bible. These Scriptures are Tobit, Judith, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Wisdom, Sirach or Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, and parts of Esther and Daniel.

apocrypha A Greek word that means “hidden,” this is the name of a separate section in some Protestant Bibles that includes the deuterocanonical books.



Shma Israel, inscribed on this scrap of pottery from the second century BC, means “Hear, O Israel,” and is the first line of The Shema prayer: “Hear, O Israel, the LORD is our God, the LORD is One.”

translations of Native American names: *Isaiah* literally means “YHWH saves” or “YHWH is salvation!” and *Jeremiah* means “YHWH has established” or “may YHWH exalt.”

In some Jewish traditions, the name YHWH is itself considered too sacred to pronounce out loud. When reading the Bible, these Jews use *Adonai* (ah-DOH-nye) as a replacement. *Adonai* simply means “my Lord.” In order to help Jewish readers, most Hebrew Bibles have taken the vowel letters from the word *Adonai* and overlaid them on the consonants for YHWH. This combination was supposed to remind the reader to say “Adonai.” However, when Christian scholars read this in centuries past, they did not know about the tradition and thought it was a real word, which they pronounced “Jehovah.” *Jehovah* is actually a mistaken reading of the name YHWH. Sometimes when Orthodox Jews write about God, they write “G*d” to remind them of the mystery of the sacred name.

Catholics have no custom of not saying the name YHWH out loud. The Church holds that the name YHWH expresses God’s faithfulness: “Despite the faithlessness of men’s sin and the punishment it deserves, he keeps ‘steadfast love for thousands’” (CCC, 211, quoting Exodus 34:7). The Church also teaches that the name YHWH reveals that God is “the fullness of Being and of every perfection, without origin and without end” (CCC, 213). As revealed to the Hebrew people, God’s love for us is steadfast, faithful, and constant.

Sharing the Faith

Write a thank-you letter to a person who has taught you about God and faith.

One way to think about the Old Testament is that these writings describe what the Hebrew people learned about YHWH over hundreds of years. In other words, God reveals himself through the words of the Old Testament precisely because he *intends and wants to be known by humans*; there are no secrets or hidden tricks. God's very being is Truth and Love. The ancient Hebrews summed up what they knew of God with the name YHWH. Catholics affirm that part of studying the Bible is remembering that the God of our faith has revealed himself as YHWH, the God who is. In the fullness of time, God revealed himself completely in the sending of his Son, Jesus Christ.

The Basic Story Line of the Divine-Human Relationship



God created humans to be in relationship with him.

Unlike most books you might choose to read, the Old Testament is not one continuous story divided into episodes or chapters. Instead, what is central to the Old Testament is one loving relationship through history between a people and their God.

From a human perspective, it's easy to understand why this relationship would be so important throughout the Old Testament. God created man out of love and calls us all to love. To love is the fundamental vocation of being human. God's offer of love to man can be understood in the context of Christian

sin An offense against God. Sin is a deliberate thought, word, deed, or omission against the eternal law of God.

marriage, where the mutual love between a husband and wife “becomes an image of the absolute and unfailing love with which God loves man” (CCC, 1604).

Yet there are ups and downs in any relationship to go along with the wonderful times. Readers of the Old Testament discover that man’s relationship with God is not always amiable. The story of the Fall of man (see Genesis 3:1–24) tells of man’s disobedience to God. This first **sin** would affect man’s relationship with God from that time on. First-time readers of the Old Testament are often surprised at how the authors of Scripture describe the level of anger that God is said to feel toward man, especially as expressed through his special messengers called prophets (see Chapter 7).

Like all relationships, the divine-human relationship described in the Old Testament has its dramatic episodes of jealousy and angry disappointment. But perhaps more impressively, the Old Testament also exhibits moments of moving intimacy, love, compassion, and forgiveness between God and his people. YHWH, according to the ancient Hebrews, had very humanlike qualities.



Prime Advice

Read Deuteronomy 6:4–5. Design an image including the words of these verses and display it prominently. For example, you might incorporate the words into an image you can use as a screen saver or illuminate them in a drawing you can save and display at home. (If your image is digital, send a copy electronically to your teacher. If it is on paper, turn it in for grading prior to taking it home.)



That's not so odd when you think about it. After all, how else can you picture a living God? A person's words are never sufficient to entirely portray God, but words are necessary for communicating with and even thinking about God. The Hebrews wanted to talk to God! They wanted *a relationship*.

Perhaps the spell that the Old Testament casts on those who study it is not unlike the fascination of being in love, with all the wonders provided by the occasional surprises, disappointments, and great joys of a romantic relationship. The study of Scripture is sometimes compared to being in love with a lady of wisdom (see Proverbs 3:13–18).

Have you ever received a letter or note from a loved one? Perhaps a new boyfriend or girlfriend? If so, you take your love letter home and read it and reread it. You want to “hear” the words of love and affection again and again. For modern Bible study, and for your relationship with God, it is as necessary to read and reread the previous words spoken between God and people as it is to continue to find new words to speak and new skills for listening to God today. In short, it is essential to return to the source, which is Scripture.

SECTION Assessment

Targeted Reading

1. How is the Bible different from other books you might read?
2. How did the Hebrew people of the Old Testament understand God?
3. What is the basic story line of the divine-human relationship in the Old Testament?

Comprehension

4. Use the terms *canon* and *deuterocanonical* to describe the Old Testament in a short paragraph.
5. What does the name *YHWH* mean?

Critical Thinking

6. What are the differences between the Hebrew Bible, the Catholic Old Testament, and most Protestant Old Testaments?



Section 1

HOW THE CHURCH INTERPRETS THE INSPIRED WRITINGS

Main Idea

It takes the help of the Church and some important skills and resources to accurately interpret the Bible.

The Catholic understanding of the inspired nature of Scripture is that human authors who were deeply moved by God wrote the Bible. The Church has accepted their writings because the same wisdom of the Holy Spirit that inspired the original authors has also inspired Church leaders—popes and bishops—through the centuries.

The written Scriptures, along with the oral preaching of the Apostles, are handed down in the Church through apostolic succession. The living transmission of the message of the Gospel of the Church, accomplished in the Holy Spirit, is called **Sacred Tradition**. Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition are bound closely together and communicate with one another. The task of interpreting God's Word, whether in Scripture or in Tradition, is entrusted to the **Magisterium**. This means that it is the bishops, in communion with the pope, who



St. Jerome translated the Hebrew Bible into Latin and made corrections to the existing Latin New Testament. His translation is known as the Vulgate.

Sacred Tradition The living transmission of the Church's Gospel message found in the Church's teaching, life, and worship. It is faithfully preserved, handed on, and interpreted by the Church's Magisterium.

Magisterium The teaching authority of the Church concerning issues of faith and morals. The Magisterium consists of the pope and the college of bishops acting together.

NOTE TAKING

Highlighting Key Concepts. As you read the section, make sure to note (1) the Magisterium's role in interpreting Scripture; (2) the two senses of Scripture; and (3) how Scripture has been translated in modern editions of the Bible.

can interpret God's Word for each generation. The Church relies equally on Scripture *and* on her living Tradition to enrich all people with God's Word. "Both sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with same sense of loyalty and reverence" (*Dei Verbum*, 9).

The writings of the Bible are valuable and powerful and help Catholics learn about God and how he builds up his Church. The Church's judgment that these writings are inspired comes from the Church's experience with these writings. They did not come to the Church prepackaged and marked "These are the inspired books." Instead, the Church leaders (Magisterium) read and studied them and came to realize that they were inspired. In its 1993 document, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, the Pontifical Biblical Commission wrote, "What characterizes Catholic exegesis is that it deliberately places itself within the living tradition of the Church."




The Process of Interpreting Scripture

All Catholics can join in the ongoing process of prayerful dialogue and study to understand the meaning of Scripture. Each succeeding generation raises new questions about Scripture and keeps the dialogue going. The preface



to the 1993 document by the Pontifical Biblical Commission states that the study of the Bible “is never finished; each age must in its own way newly seek to understand the sacred books.”

In order for you to interpret Scripture correctly, you must pay attention to both what the human author wanted to say and what the Holy Spirit intended to communicate. To find out the human author’s intentions, you must take into account the time and culture, the literary forms of the time, and the manner of speaking and thinking that was current then. Since Scripture is inspired, it “must be read and interpreted in the sacred spirit in which it was written” (*Dei Verbum*, 12 § 3). The Second Vatican Council offered three rules or criteria for interpreting Scripture in the sacred spirit in which it was written:

-  1 Look closely at the content and unity of the whole of Scripture.
-  2 Read Scripture within “the living Tradition of the whole Church.”
-  3 Be attentive to the analogy of faith—the unity of the truths of faith among themselves and within the whole context of God’s Revelation.

It is the task of those who study the Bible to work, according to these rules, toward a better understanding and explanation of Scripture. The Magisterium of the Church is ultimately responsible for “guarding [the Word of God] scrupulously and explaining it faithfully in accord with a divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit” (*Dei Verbum*, 10). The Church’s understanding of and wisdom about the Scriptures increases over time. And our compassionate God has not abandoned us *only* to the words in the Scriptures: the Holy Spirit continues to lead us through the Church.

Two Senses of Scripture

The Church teaches that there are two senses of Scripture: the literal and the spiritual.

The *literal sense* of Scripture is foundational. It refers to what the words directly mean, either in a precise sense (e.g., the narrative of the Passion) or in a figurative sense (e.g., a metaphor or parable).

The *spiritual sense* refers to how the words of Scripture can be signs of something more profound. Understanding the Bible in this way is important



The parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14–30 can be understood in light of its figurative sense.

for a student of the Old Testament. The spiritual sense has three parts. The *allegorical* sense helps you to understand how some of the events of the Old Testament prefigure Christ; for example, the crossing of the Red Sea symbolizes Christ's victory over death. The *moral* sense teaches you how to act in a right way; for example, Abraham's faith teaches you to believe in Christ. The *anagogical* sense (from a Greek word for "leading") helps you to relate the events of Scripture to your final destiny: heaven.

Three Necessary Skills for Bible Study

Related to the three rules listed on the previous page, there are several skills that further help in studying the Bible.

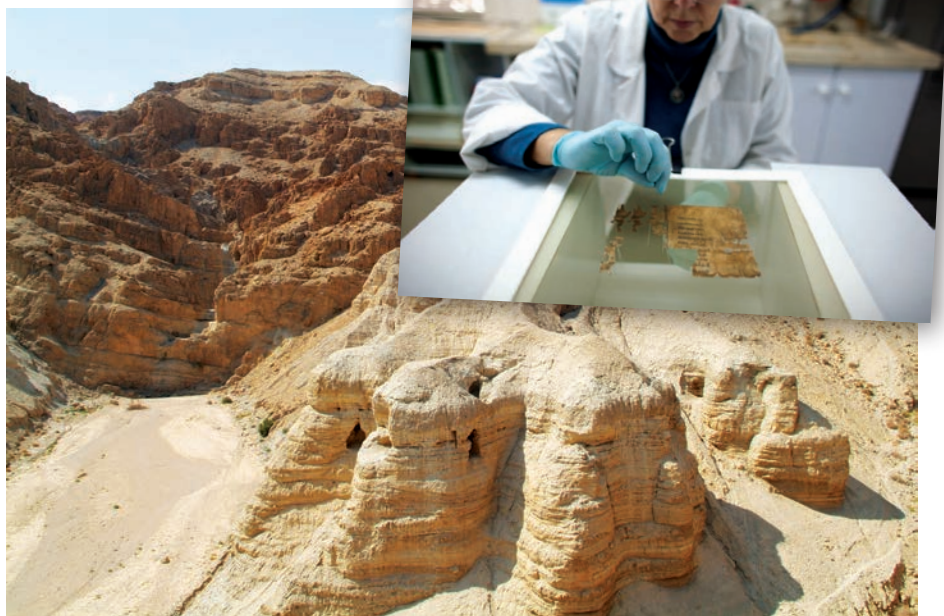
Background in Biblical Languages

One of these skills is understanding some basics about the original languages in which the Old Testament was written. Many languages were spoken and written in the ancient Near East during the time of the writing of the Old Testament. Most of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew, but parts were written in Aramaic (a language very close to Hebrew but more widely spoken

among ancient peoples), and some of the later writings were in Greek. Hebrew and Aramaic are known as “Semitic” languages. Hebrew, Arabic, and Maltese are among the few modern Semitic languages spoken today.

The grammar and vocabulary of Hebrew and other Semitic languages are similar. Many of the words sound alike and mean the same thing. For example, the word *peace* is *shalom* in Hebrew and *salaam* in Arabic. Knowing that these languages are related can help you to understand the culture, context, and wider political and social setting of ancient Hebrew history. In fact, serious students of the Bible learn to read Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek in order to study the Bible in its original languages.

Of course, most people do not speak or read these original biblical languages and have to rely on translators to bring the words of the Bible to them. Today there are many different English translations of the Bible. How accurate are they? To understand the answer to this question, you need to ask yourself some analogous questions. For example, why can’t Scientist number 1 announce that he has discovered the cure for cancer one day and immediately sell the cure for money the next day? Or why can’t Scientist number 2 claim that there is another planet in our solar system that is beyond



The Dead Sea Scrolls, found in the Qumran Caves, contained both complete scrolls and fragments of scrolls and texts that had to be pieced together.

Pluto (or that Pluto is not a planet at all!) and have her claim accepted immediately? The answer, of course, is that any scientist would have to *prove* his or her announcement to many other scientists! A discovery isn't considered real until *many* people confirm it.

Translation of the Bible is similar. There are literally hundreds of ancient manuscripts of the Bible in Greek, Hebrew, and many other ancient languages that translators compare with one another. A translation into English is never based on one or two texts in Greek and Hebrew; it is based on *dozens and dozens* of texts! It is usually pretty easy to spot single mistakes from one ancient scribe when you have more than a hundred other texts of the same passage to compare.

Not only are there many texts to work with but there are lots of people working on them simultaneously. Biblical scholars—both Catholic and Protestant—meet regularly in conferences, compare notes, argue about their ideas, and suggest new ideas. Bible translations that are used today are the results of years and years of scholarship, learning, debate, and checking. Biblical scholars are learning more all the time, and new discoveries provide those who read and pray with the Bible more confidence about the translations. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947–1956, for example, helped biblical scholars and all Christians tremendously because these scrolls were copies of the Hebrew Bible that were almost *a thousand years* older than the Hebrew texts we had previously. The Dead Sea Scrolls helped to confirm the previous translations.

The details of biblical translations are debated, but it would be virtually impossible for someone to suggest a wild translation and get it past all the other translators who are also working on these texts. Take, for example, the *New American Bible, revised edition*, which is the translation quoted in this text. In 1943, Pope Pius XII issued an encyclical on Scripture studies. He wrote:



Ought we to explain the original text which, having been written by the inspired author himself, has more authority and greater weight than any even the very best translation, whether ancient or modern; this can be done all the more easily and fruitfully, if to the knowledge of languages be joined a real skill in literary criticism of the same text. (*Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 16)

The text of the *New American Bible, revised edition* is a completely new translation taken from the original and the oldest available sacred texts (see preface to the *New American Bible, revised edition*, Old Testament). Again, it's important to remember also that the pope and college of bishops are ultimately responsible not only for determining the validity of a translation but also for interpreting its words.

Knowledge of Contemporary Religious Writings

Another skill for serious Bible study is knowledge of other ancient writings and how they compare to the biblical text. A large number of books that have survived from before the time of Jesus, mostly from the Hellenistic and Roman periods (323 BC through about AD 250), are known as **pseudepigrapha**. Many such books were discovered in 1945 near Nag Hammadi in Egypt. These books are of considerable historical, literary, and religious interest for the study of the late Old Testament era and early Christianity. They have long been translated into English, are readily available, and provide scholars with an excellent idea of the great diversity in religious thinking in these times.



The texts found near Nag Hammadi are known as the Nag Hammadi library. They include the only complete text of the Gospel of Thomas as well as a partial translation of Plato's Republic.

While there is nothing dangerous or secret about these writings (although some of them are a bit odd), the Church long ago determined that they do not belong among the inspired books of the Old and New Testaments. It's a good idea to have a strong grounding in the Bible before launching into reading these non-biblical materials—particularly if you want to appreciate how these other books use biblical

pseudepigrapha Ancient religious books from the same time frame as the books of the Bible, especially the New Testament. The Church decided these books do not belong among the inspired books of the Old and New Testaments.

ideas and then go in different directions. As interesting as some of these other books are, they aren't nearly as interesting as the Bible itself. If you become a serious student of the Bible in college, that will be the time to read and analyze them.



This Egyptian stele, dating ca. twelfth century BC, was found in Beth Shean (Israel). The hieroglyphic inscription commemorates the crushing of a rebellion in Canaan by Pharaoh Seti I.

The books that are in the canon of the Old Testament and New Testament are historically considered the inspired books of the Bible. *Inspired* means that what is written in them is what God wanted communicated to humankind. Any interpretation of the Bible must be attentive above all to what God wants to reveal through the sacred authors; what comes from the Spirit is not fully understood except by the Spirit's action. Reading the Bible, in short, is not simply an intellectual exercise, but a prayerful one as well. As the *Catechism*, quoting Luke 24:45, reminds us: "If the Scriptures are not to remain a dead letter, Christ, the eternal Word of the living God, must, through the Holy Spirit, open [our] minds to understand the Scriptures" (CCC, 108).

Archaeological Knowledge

Finally, for serious study of the Bible, **archaeology** is also of importance. Archaeology is both a science and an art. Imagine you are an archaeologist digging out the remains of a village from biblical times. What would you find? You might discover the lines of foundations, perhaps some remnants of building materials, possibly some gravesites, and maybe a trash dump with remnants of broken jars and containers. That is the science part, what you actually see.

What can you learn from this kind of evidence? Here is where science meets art or, in other words, where evidence meets intuition. Sometimes it is difficult to reconstruct in your mind today what the buildings looked like,

archaeology The science of studying material remains of past human life and activities.

how the people lived, and what they did. For example, maybe you are having difficulty identifying the name of the village. Then you must search for clues.

In the ancient Near East, it is possible that the name of the village may be found on clay tablets or papyrus scrolls. Or the Bible can help if it refers to a particular village in the area of the excavation. Sometimes modern local



What “Inspiration” Means

God is the author of Sacred Scripture. But what exactly does that mean? The Bible was not literally penned by God. It did not fall from the sky. The Catholic understanding is that inspiration involves God inspiring human authors to write the sacred words. Another Christian viewpoint is more literal, holding that the words themselves are inspired. For the sake of understanding, examine critically both points of view.

If it is the *authors* who are inspired, then how can it be certain that they fully and adequately wrote down what should have been written?

If it is merely the *words* that are inspired, then the authors’ importance diminishes: anybody could have written inspired words accurately—even a young child could have done it! Doesn’t it matter that the writers were spiritual people, deeply in tune with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit? Would we be satisfied to say that they acted like robots and just copied words “whispered in their ear” by the Holy Spirit?

Finally, just because someone says that a word is from God, doesn’t make it so! There needs to be some acknowledgment and recognition from the Church. Remember the famous question “If a tree falls in the forest and nobody hears it, does it make a sound?” In a similar way, how can a word be inspired if nobody hears it, learns from it, and repeats it? The Church is the final part of inspiration.

ASSIGNMENT

Form small groups to debate the meaning of “inspiration.” Share the conclusions of your group’s debate with the rest of the class.

traditions may help. Sometimes names are found on **artifacts**. For example, a discovery in northern Israel from the early 1990s mentioned “The House of David,” and an Assyrian royal carving found many decades ago famously pictures Omri, a king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel who is mentioned in 1 Kings and 1 Chronicles. Archaeological discoveries that mention biblical persons or places can confirm their existences, though not everything about the context of the persons or places. Archaeology and biblical study, therefore, must always be in dialogue because archaeological discoveries need interpretation as much as biblical texts do.

SECTION Assessment

Targeted Reading

1. How do Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition function together in transmitting God’s Word?
2. Explain the literal sense and the spiritual sense of Scripture.
3. How are Bibles that are used today translated from their original sources?

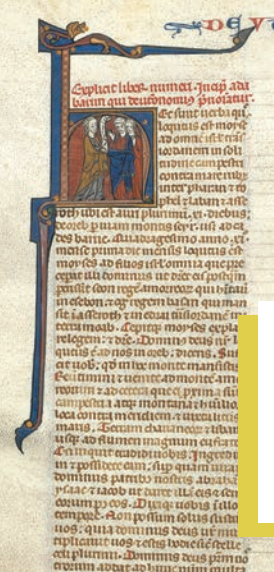
Comprehension

4. What does it mean to say a biblical book is inspired?
5. List and describe three helpful skills needed in the interpretation of Scripture.

Critical Thinking

6. What is the ideal relationship between archaeology and biblical study?

artifacts Items created by past humans, usually for a specific purpose (tools, pottery, clothing, etc.).



Section 2

CLASSIFYING AND ARRANGING THE OLD TESTAMENT BOOKS

Main Idea

The organization of the Old Testament and the history of the Hebrew people shed important light on the scope of **salvation history**.

The Jewish people traditionally divided the books of the Hebrew Bible into three distinct sections: The Law (in Hebrew, *Torah*), The Prophets (in Hebrew, *Nevi'im*), and The Writings (in Hebrew, *Ketuvim*). If you put together the first letters of the three Hebrew names of the sections, you get the acronym *TaNaK*, the term often used as shorthand by modern Jews to refer to the Hebrew Bible.

The Hebrew Bible is divided into twenty-four books. The Law consists of the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The Prophets are subdivided into the Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings) and the Latter Prophets (the Major Prophets [Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel] and the Twelve, or Minor, Prophets). The Writings include eleven books: Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel (also a prophet and sometimes considered as a fourth major prophet), Ezra/Nehemiah, and Chronicles.

The books of the Old Testament in the *New American Bible, revised edition* are arranged slightly differently. Look at the chart on the next page. After the *Pentateuch* (Greek for “five books”; this corresponds to the Law in the Hebrew Bible) come the *historical books*, the *wisdom books*, and the *prophetic books*.

The most important thing to keep in mind about the arrangement of the books is that the Bible is *not* in chronological order. The first books are *not* necessarily the oldest books, and the final books are *not* necessarily the most recently written. Nor is it true that events recorded in earlier books all took place before the events in later books. For example, Leviticus and Deuteronomy

salvation history Term used to describe God’s presence and work throughout all of human history.

NOTE TAKING

Classifying. Create notes in two sets of columns. In one set of columns, list the three sections of the Hebrew Bible and one biblical book from each section. In a second set of columns, list the four classifications of the Old Testament with one biblical book for each.

THE PENTATEUCH

Genesis	Gn	Exodus	Ex	Leviticus	Lv
Numbers	Nm	Deuteronomy	Dt		

THE HISTORICAL BOOKS

Joshua	Jos	Judges	Jgs	Ruth	Ru
1 Samuel	1 Sm	2 Samuel	2 Sm	1 Kings	1 Kgs
2 Kings	2 Kgs	1 Chronicles	1 Chr	2 Chronicles	2 Chr
Ezra	Ezr	Nehemiah	Neh	Tobit	Tb
Judith	Jdt	Esther	Est	1 Maccabees	1 Mc
2 Maccabees	2 Mc				

THE WISDOM BOOKS

Job	Jb	Psalms	Ps(s)	Proverbs	Prv
Ecclesiastes	Eccl	Song of Songs	Sg	Wisdom	Ws
Sirach	Sir				

THE PROPHETIC BOOKS

Isaiah	Is	Jeremiah	Jer	Lamentations	Lam
Baruch	Bar	Ezekiel	Ez	Daniel	Dn
Hosea	Hos	Joel	Jl	Amos	Am
Obadiah	Ob	Jonah	Jon	Micah	Mi
Nahum	Na	Habakkuk	Hb	Zephaniah	Zep
Haggai	Hg	Zechariah	Zec	Malachi	Mal

both include details about Moses receiving the Ten Commandments. A reader needs to learn about history and the text in order to have a good sense of when a book was written. But there is also the certainty that many books were edited at a later time or were combinations of other books. For example, the psalms were probably once in shorter collections before being put together to form the large collection that is the Book of Psalms today. (Catholics, Protestants, and most Jews include 150 psalms in their canon; Orthodox Christians have 151 psalms.)

Some biblical books even quote books that are not in the Old Testament canon—for example, the “book of the chronicles of the kings of Israel” (e.g., 1 Kgs 14:19, 15:31) or the “Book of Jashar” (Jos 10:13; 2 Sm 1:18). These were likely ancient books that the biblical authors had in front of them as they were writing their texts.

Dating the Composition of the Old Testament

So when were the books of the Old Testament written? The earliest of the biblical books are based on oral traditions that were first written down either during the time of Solomon (around 950 BC) or perhaps between 900 and 700 BC. The latest books (especially many of the deuterocanonical books) were written, probably in Greek, around 150–100 BC.

The time of Solomon is usually cited as the era of the earliest books because it is believed that Solomon would have been the first king of Israel who had scribes to do some of the writing. Another school of thought is that most of the early writings come from later on—the eighth or seventh century BC—when there is more evidence of widespread literacy and of royal administrations that would have kept such written records. Ancient writing required institutions—a scribal class—and not merely a few literate persons.

Most certainly, a large portion of the Bible was revised after the fall of Jerusalem in 587–586 BC. The revision involved adding new insight to the original work. The revisions to the inspired texts do not in any way impact their sacredness. Remember, inspiration refers to what God *wanted* recorded in the Bible, including clarification of that message by editors.

To summarize, the dating of when different books of the Bible were written and edited and began to take on the form that we have today continues to be debated. Of course, since many biblical books were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, we know that much of the Bible was already in its present form by one to two hundred years before the time of Jesus.

Ancient Hebrew History

A BASIC OUTLINE

The following dates represent important milestones in the history of the Hebrew people. These are especially important to introductory students of the Old Testament, as they will allow you to relate specific books of the Old Testament to specific events and time periods.



APPROXIMATELY 1260 BC The Exodus of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt under the leadership of Moses. The date of the Exodus cannot be certain but is usually connected to the reign of Pharaoh Rameses II (1279–1213 BC).

1208–1207 BC Pharaoh Merneptah carved a memorial to his military campaigns in Canaan that mentions the people “Israel.” The carving is dated to 1208 or 1207 BC. This is the first use of the word *Israel* in history. Therefore, we know that a people who called themselves “Israel” were in Canaan at least by 1208–1207 BC.



CA. 1030 BC The beginning of the Hebrew monarchy (kings) in Canaan after the period of the judges. This is often called the United Monarchy because there was, for a time, only one king for all the Hebrew people: first Saul, then David, and finally Solomon.

CA. 930 BC The death of Solomon resulted in the division of the Hebrew people into two states (sometimes rivals, sometimes allies): Judah in the south and Israel in the north.

722 BC The fall of the Northern Kingdom to the invading Assyrians from north-western Mesopotamia (in what is today Iraq and Syria).



640–609 BC The reign of King Josiah in Judah. Josiah instituted what scholars call the Deuteronomic Reform (because it is presumed that the laws of Deuteronomy inspired his religious reform movement). It is likely that most of the historical writings of Joshua through 2 Kings (six scrolls or books) come from this period.

587–586 BC The final defeat of Judah by the Babylonian Empire under King Nebuchadnezzar, who deported many Judean citizens. The Jerusalem Temple built by Solomon was destroyed.

539 BC Cyrus, the Persian king, defeats the Babylonians and allows some of the captive peoples to begin returning to their homelands.

520–515 BC The most probable date for the building of the Second Temple in Jerusalem.



CA. 450 BC The approximate time of the missions of Nehemiah and Ezra, Hebrews who traveled back to Palestine from the Babylonian Exile.

333 BC Alexander the Great's invasions of Palestine and the Near East—beginning of the influence of Hellenism (Greek culture).



167 BC Antiochus IV (Epiphanes) attempts to unite his territory through forced Hellenization. There was serious oppression of many Jews during this time. As a direct result, the Maccabean revolt breaks out, as described in the First and Second Books of Maccabees.

CA. 63 BC Palestine comes under direct Roman control, although the Romans had been watching events in Palestine for some time and had occasionally involved themselves in local disputes.



CA. 6–4 BC The birth of Jesus.



AD 70 The destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans and the scattering of the Jerusalem Christians mostly eastward.

SECTION Assessment

Targeted Reading

1. How does the Jewish classification of the books of Hebrew Scriptures differ from the way Catholics classify the books of the Old Testament in the *New American Bible, revised edition*?

Comprehension

2. Why is it difficult to pinpoint when a specific Old Testament book was written?
3. Using the timeline in this section as a guide, describe the key moments in the history of the Jerusalem Temple.

Critical Thinking

4. What are some struggles the Hebrew people experienced throughout their history?



Section 3

HOW IMPORTANT IS THE OLD TESTAMENT IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH?

Main Idea

The Church considers the Old Testament the inspired Word of God, useful for study, prayer, and interpretation of the New Testament.

The title of this section poses a very important question for your study of the Old Testament in the context of your course in a Catholic high school. The Church considers the Old Testament “an indispensable part of Sacred Scripture” (CCC, 121). The Old Testament is the true Word of God. The Church has always rejected any idea that the New Testament voided the Old Testament. All of the books of the Old Testament are inspired by God; they contain many teachings on God, wisdom on human life, a treasury of prayers, and a glimpse of the mystery of salvation. The Old Testament offers a “prefiguration” of what God did in the fullness of time in the Person of his Son, Jesus Christ. This means that Christians read the Old Testament “in the light of Christ crucified and risen” (CCC, 129). This unity between the Old Testament and the New Testament is understood based on **typology**.

As fourth-century Church Father St. Augustine put it, “The New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New” (quoted in CCC, 129). Christians read the Old Testament in the light of Christ but also remember that the Old Testament has “its own intrinsic value as Revelation reaffirmed by our Lord himself” (CCC, 129). When asked which was the first of all the commandments, Jesus taught those he learned from the Hebrew Scriptures (see Mark 12:28–34).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* summarizes the importance of the Old Testament to the Church, as taught by the Second Vatican Council:

typology The study of prefigured patterns of divine activity. Typology in Scripture study involves reading the Old Testament in light of Christ crucified and risen.

NOTE TAKING

Defining. In your notes, write definitions of the Old Testament and New Testament based on the material in this section.

Indeed, “the economy of the Old Testament was deliberately so oriented that it should prepare for and declare in prophecy the coming of Christ, redeemer of all men.” (CCC, 122, quoting *Dei Verbum*, 15)

As the Church itself was foreshadowed from the beginning of creation, the Church “was prepared in a remarkable way throughout the history of the people of Israel and by means of the Old Covenant” (*Lumen Gentium*, 2).

The Old Testament Is Part of Jesus’ Bible

It is important to remember that when you read the Old Testament, you are sharing this book with another living faith, Judaism. The faith of the Jews is a viable and living response to God’s Revelation in the Old Testament. The Catholic Church does not believe, as some Christians unfortunately and wrongly think, that the Jews have been “rejected” or even “cursed” by

God. This thinking is a form of anti-Semitism and should be rejected by all Christians. Judaism has a unique relationship to Christianity. Christians ought to affirm Jewish response to God and indeed learn from it as a means of enriching our own faith response to God.

After all, Jesus and most of the Christians in the first generation of the Church were Jews. As you study the Old Testament, remember that you are in effect studying “Jesus’ Bible”—it was for



An illuminated manuscript of the Pentateuch.

the most part *the* Scripture used by Jesus. We have the benefit of later books written about Jesus and quoting Jesus. But the Bible of Jesus himself and his first followers is what we study in this course.

What Does It Mean to Do a Critical Reading of the Bible?

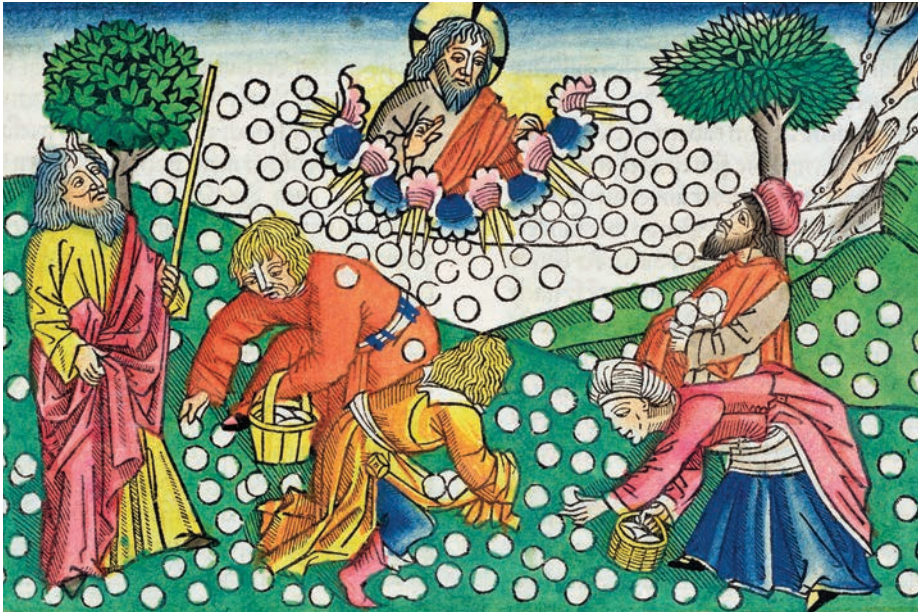
A final question to pose as you begin a detailed study of the Old Testament has to do with the nature of the study itself. A first truth must be acknowledged: the books of the Bible have been written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This means that, while God chose men as authors, he also instructed them in “writing everything and only those things which He wanted” (*Dei Verbum*, 11). Therefore, because the authors were inspired by the Holy Spirit, the books of the Bible “must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation” (*Dei Verbum*, 11).



This ivory plaque depicts King David dictating the psalms.

Nevertheless, since God speaks in the Scriptures through human authors, it is necessary to apply tools of **critical reading** to find out what God wants to communicate to us. What is meant by “critical” reading of the Bible? First, critical reading does *not* mean finding faults, picking apart, or making disparaging remarks. Rather, in biblical studies, critical reading simply means very careful examination of and careful reflection about all the information at hand. To understand the Scriptures, you must try to figure out what the authors wanted to say and what God wanted to reveal in those writings. This means paying special attention to the historical time

critical reading A number of methods of studying the Bible that aim to discover what God is communicating, both to the people of biblical times and to people today.



God sending manna from heaven to feed the Hebrew people during the Exodus tells us that God cares for his people's physical needs as well as their spiritual ones.

and the culture in which the writing took place and to the literary styles the author used.

To think “critically” about the Bible, however, is by no means an easy task. This is a book that is not merely a typical human writing. The Bible is the Word of God. The Church teaches that the Word of God is the “light for our path” (CCC, 1785, quoting Psalm 119:105), and you must study in faith and prayer to put it in practice. The Scriptures guide our sense of conscience and morality. The ability to deal with difficult questions raised by careful analysis is a mark of a mature belief in God, even if it means living with open questions or difficult problems. Being willing to live with questions that you are wondering about is a part of becoming a serious student.

If, when you begin to read the Bible, you wonder whether the Adam and Eve stories are religious parables rather than literal history, this is not an evil question. Looking at the text in this way can help you to recognize what the Bible actually intends to teach. The particular historical details about a man and woman living naked in a garden talking with a snake are not as important as the basic point that at some time in history the first man and woman sinned

against God, who nevertheless continues to love humankind and call all people back into relationship with him.

The Old Testament remains a primary source for the Catholic faith. Catholics do well to take seriously the God who liberates slaves, unseats kings, speaks through radical prophets, and acts within history. A serious study of the Old Testament will deepen your understanding of God and how he revealed himself over time to humankind. The fathers of the Second Vatican Council taught:

And the force and power in the word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons, the food of the soul, the pure and everlasting source of spiritual life. (*Dei Verbum*, 21)

SECTION Assessment

Targeted Reading

1. How would you describe the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament?

Comprehension

2. What is critical reading of the Bible? What is the purpose of critical reading?

Critical Thinking

3. What are four reasons laypeople today should study the Bible with critical reading tools?

Section Summaries

Focus Question

How should I approach the study of the Old Testament?

Complete all of the following:

- Read paragraphs 9–10 of *Dei Verbum*. Answer: What is the connection between Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition?
- Read paragraph 12 of *Dei Verbum*. Answer: How should a person interpret Sacred Scripture?
- Read paragraphs 15–16 of *Dei Verbum*. Answer: What is the principal purpose of the Old Testament?

Introduction

Essential Preparation for Studying the Old Testament

The Catholic Old Testament is a collection of forty-six books, including seven deuterocanonical books. The Old Testament contains the story of the Hebrew people learning about God, whose name is YHWH and whom they call “Adonai.” This story reveals the loving relationship between God and his people.

- In what ways has God’s love for you been steadfast, faithful, and constant? Write a one-page letter containing a short testimony of your faith to someone younger than you (e.g., a younger sibling, someone in a religious education class, or a scout).

Section 1

How the Church Interprets the Inspired Writings

Human authors who were inspired by God wrote the Bible. The Magisterium—made up of the pope and bishops—interprets God’s Word in Scripture and Tradition. There are two senses of Scripture: the *literal sense* and the *spiritual sense*. Translations of the Old Testament from Hebrew, Aramaic,

and Greek are challenging, but scholars work together to create accurate translations. Various noncanonical books known as pseudepigrapha that have been discovered assist in the translation and interpretation of the Old Testament. The art and science of archaeology offers important assistance to biblical interpretation.

- How has a passage from the Old Testament inspired you in your relationship with God? What do you think God wished to communicate to you through this Bible passage? Answer in complete sentences.

Section 2

Classifying and Arranging the Old Testament Books

The Jews divide the Hebrew Scriptures into three distinct sections; this differs from the way Catholics arrange the Old Testament in the *New American Bible, revised edition*. The Old Testament developed over a period of many years, and it is difficult to determine the exact date when books were written and edited.

- Read the Book of Tobit. What message do you think God is sharing in it regarding relationships (e.g., between children and parents, husbands and wives, self and God)?

Section 3

How Important Is the Old Testament in the Life of the Church?

The Old Testament is the inspired Word of God and is not voided by the New Testament. According to St. Augustine, “The New Testament lies hidden in the Old Testament and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New.” Critical reading of the Bible involves examining what the authors wanted to say and what God wanted to reveal.

- Read one of the following passages from the Old Testament: Psalm 42:1–12, Sirach 2:1–11, Psalm 139:1–24, or Isaiah 43:1–7. Spend some time in silence, reflecting on the meaning of the passage. Then write your own prayer based on the passage. You will have an opportunity to share your prayer with the class.

Chapter Assignments

Choose and complete at least one of the assignments to assess your understanding of the material in this chapter.

1. Examples of Jesus Using the Bible

- When Jesus referenced Scripture, he meant the Hebrew Bible, which Christians call the Old Testament. Skim through the Gospels to find five examples of Jesus quoting Scripture. Create a three-column chart. In column 1, write the reference. In column 2, copy the passage. In column 3, explain how the Old Testament passage related to what Jesus was teaching.

2. Team Game: More Questions about the Old Testament

- Write on separate note cards three questions you have about the Old Testament that were not asked and answered during the coverage of this chapter. Write your name at the bottom of each card. Exchange your note cards with another student in class. Research and write on the cards answers to each other's questions. Write your name below the answers that you write. Form a team of four students, and play a game against another team of four. Take turns asking questions to the other team. Team members can take three minutes to discuss possible answers. Partially correct answers are awarded five points. Complete correct answers are worth ten points. Compete to a given amount of total points (e.g., fifty) or until all questions have been asked by both teams. Turn your note cards in to your teacher.

3. Old Testament Research Proposal

- Imagine that you are a PhD student researching the Old Testament at a Catholic university. You are asked to develop a research proposal for the interpretation of a book in the Old Testament called the First Book of Maccabees. You must answer the following questions within the proposal:
 - What type of book is this, and when did its events likely take place?

- What documents, books, and tools will you consult to interpret this book?
- What types of people will you contact in the course of your study?
- Whose research will you consult during your study?

Write a research proposal based on these questions. Your research proposal should include the following items:

- title
- the proposed topic you plan to research
- the answers to the questions above
- three other questions like those listed above that you will research
- two bibliography sources you will use in your report

Vocabulary Review

Directions: Match each term with its definition below.

archaeology	artifacts	canon	critical reading
deuterocanonical	Magisterium	pseudepigrapha	
Sacred Tradition	typology		

1. Books from around the time of the Bible that are not considered part of the Bible.
2. The teaching authority of the Church, which consists of the pope and college of bishops acting together.
3. A term meaning “of the second canon”; describes books in the Catholic Old Testament that are not in the Hebrew Bible.
4. An official list of books accepted as Holy Scripture.
5. The living transmission of the Church’s Gospel message found in the Church’s teaching, life, and worship.
6. The science of studying material remains of past human life and activities.
7. Items such as tools, pottery, clothing, etc., that were created in the past.
8. Involves reading the Old Testament in the light of Christ crucified and risen.
9. Methods of studying the Bible that aim to discover what God is communicating.

New Testament Connection

"Jesus Is Lord!" (CCC, 449)

One way Jesus and early Christians expressed Jesus' divinity was by making connections between the way he described himself and the ways God was named in the Hebrew Scriptures—that is, "YHWH." In John's Gospel there are a series of sayings that include the words "I am," referring to God's self-identification to Moses in the Old Testament as YHWH, which is translated as "I am." You will probably recognize many of these "I am" statements:

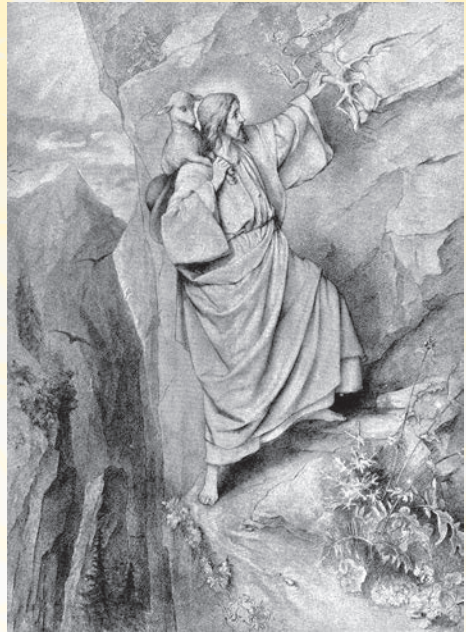
"I am the bread of life." (Jn 6:35, 48)

"I am the light of the world." (Jn 8:12, 9:5)

"I am the good shepherd." (Jn 10:11–14)

"I am the way and the truth and the life." (Jn 14:6)

Another connection between Jesus and YHWH of the Old Testament is Jesus' identity as "Lord." Since YHWH was a sacred name, *Adonai* was used in its place. Early Christians had the same feelings about the sacredness of God's name, so they referred to Jesus as "Lord." St. Paul quotes an early Christian hymn in his Letter to the Philippians that ends with a common early Christian acclamation: "Jesus Christ is Lord" (Phil 2:11). When the Apostle Thomas recognized the Risen Christ as Jesus, he exclaimed, "My Lord and my God!" (Jn 20:28). In addition,



Christ the Good Shepherd.

throughout the Gospels Jesus is addressed as "Lord" by those who seek help and healing (see Matthew 8:2, 14:30, 15:22). "By attributing to Jesus the divine title 'Lord,' the first confessions of the Church's faith affirm from the

beginning that the power, honor, and glory due to God the Father are due also to Jesus” (CCC, 449). To say, “Jesus is Lord!” is an expression of the divinity of Christ.

YHWH, ADONAI	THE LORD JESUS CHRIST
God is YHWH, which is translated as “I am” (Ex 3:14).	John’s “I am” statements (Jn 6:35, 6:48, 8:12, 9:5, 10:7, 10:11–14, 11:25, 14:6, 15:1, 15:5)
<i>Adonai</i> , or “Lord,” was used in place of God’s sacred name (Ex 3:15).	“Jesus [Christ] is Lord!” was a popular early Christian acclamation (Rom 10:9; 1 Cor 12:3; Phil 2:11).
	Jesus is often addressed as “Lord” (Mt 8:2, 14:30, 15:22).

- *Additional Reading:* CCC, 203–211, 446–451

Called to Prayer

Do not fear: I am with you;
do not be anxious; I am your God.
I will strengthen you, I will help you,
I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.
—Isaiah 41:10

- *Reflection:* Think of a time when you were afraid. How would these words from God have helped you in that situation?
- *Meditation:* Read the passage over multiple times, and choose one word or phrase that particularly jumps out at you today. What meaning does this word or phrase have for you at this moment? Spend a few minutes concentrating on the meaning of this word or phrase.
- *Resolution:* Is there anything in your future that is currently causing you fear and anxiety? Write this Scripture verse somewhere as a reminder that you have no need to be afraid.