

SUGGESTIONS FOR STUDYING THE OLD TESTAMENT IN A SMALL GROUP OR IN PRIVATE

The study of all 46 books of the Old Testament could take several years to complete. The following suggestions are for small groups that are prepared to spend four seasons (of six or seven weeks per season) over a period of two years on some books of the Old Testament.

Season One: Introduction to the Bible; Book of Genesis

We study an overview of the Bible, after which we go into a detailed study of Genesis.

Article 1 summarizes most of the material found in introductory books on the Bible, i.e., five stages of the Bible's formation; how the Church decided on which books to include and exclude from the Bible; meaning of the terms divine inspiration and inerrancy; how the Catholic approach to biblical interpretation differs from a fundamentalist approach; why Catholic Bibles have seven more books than a Protestant Bible; and an overview of all 72 books of the Bible.

Articles 2-6 focus on the Book of Genesis, a book about "beginnings": the beginnings of the world and the human race (chs. 1-2), the beginning and spread of sin (chs. 3-11), the beginnings of a nation (chs. 12-50).

Season Two: Exodus and Numbers

We pick up Israel's story where Genesis left off. The Book of Exodus is regarded as the most important book of the Old Testament because it recounts the two most important events in Israel's history: her liberation from the slavery of Egypt and her entry into a solemn covenant with God at Sinai. The Book of Numbers narrates Israel's journey from Sinai to the borders of the Promised Land.

As you will see below, I am *not* suggesting that you read *all* of Exodus and Numbers. Several chapters in both books disrupt the narrative with very detailed descriptions of the construction of the Ark of the Covenant and regulations about worship and ritual. Suggested chapters to read.

Exodus chapters 1-20, 32-34, 40:34-38

Numbers 10:14-44, 16:1-17:27, 20:1-25, 27:12-22

Season Three: Historical Books – Joshua, Judges 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings

Six of the historical books of the Old Testament cover about 700 years of Israel's history from the conquest of the Promised Land (1250 BC) through the Period of the Judges, the rise and fall of the Monarchy, all the way to the Babylonian Exile (587 BC).

If you decide to follow the *Level Three* version of the commentaries on these six books, it may take two or more seasons to cover them. If you use the *Level One* version, it may be possible to cover one book during one study session. When you come upon a difficult verse or incident, you can consult the *Level Three* version commentary.

Season Four: Introduction to the Prophetic and Wisdom Books of the Bible – Isaiah, Psalms and Tobit

We are introduced to the prophetic and wisdom literature of the Old Testament.

Article 43 introduces us to the prophets, often called the conscience of Israel. The prophets are grouped in relationship to Judah's exile in Babylon, i.e., pre-exilic, exilic, and post-exilic prophets.

Isaiah. The Book of Isaiah actually comprises three books and covers Judah's (South Kingdom) history before, during, and after the exile. The following are suggested articles to read:

- **First Isaiah – Level One** (chs.1-39) introduces us to all three books of Isaiah and to the historical context of First Isaiah, with suggested texts to read.
- **Deutero (Second) Isaiah – Level One** (chs. 40-55). The author is addressing his people who are in exile in Babylon. Second Isaiah contains some of the most beautiful texts in the Old Testament.
- **Trito (Third) Isaiah – Level One** (chs. 56-66). The author is addressing the exiles who have now returned to their homeland.

Wisdom Books. Article 66 introduces us to the seven Wisdom books of the Old Testament.

Book of Psalms. Article 76 introduces us to the worship life of Israel, to the many types of psalms, the theology of the psalms, and much more. To open the Book of Psalms is to open the door into the worship world of Jewish believers since 1,000 BC and of Christian believers since the time of Christ.

Tobit (a historical novel). The Books of Tobit, Judith and Esther are placed amongst the *historical books* of the Old Testament. They do not belong there because they are more fictional (called “historical novels” by some scholars) than historical. Article 40 gives us the historical context for the Book of Tobit. While the Level One can be used as a study guide for this book, I recommend following the Level Three article because it is very hard to only read excerpts from a very engaging story.

A SUGGESTED METHOD OF STUDY

Integrating the reading of the biblical text with the commentary (especially with the long version) may be a challenge. There is no one way to do this. Different facilitators will proceed in different ways. The following is the approach I take.

- Ask the group to read beforehand the biblical text to focus on in the study session.
- Read some key texts from the block of chapters covered for that study session, usually the texts suggested in the Level One of the particular book.
- Read the commentary—if not all of it, at least most of it. Stop at the “Pause Questions” for discussion. (Note: Even though most of the questions are intended to connect the text with our lives, the facilitator can always ask the basic questions: What spoke to you most in what we have just read? What did you underline?)

Three resources

1. **The Catholic Bible – Personal Study Edition.** I cannot recommend this book enough. It contains the biblical text and introduces each of the 73 books of the Bible under the following headings:

Who are the main players?
 What should I look for?
 When did this take place?
 Where did these events occur?
 Why was this book written?
 What is the story?

In addition to responding to the above questions, it has helpful insights and commentary on each book of the Bible.

2. ***Inside the Bible – Kenneth Baker, S.J.*** This wonderful book also gives a very helpful and easy-to-read introduction to all 73 books of the Bible under the following headings:

Place in the Bible
Date and author
Theme
Summary
Theology
Outline – division of chapters

3. ***The Collegeville Bible Commentary.*** This 800+ page book has a commentary by different authors on *each* of the books of the Old Testament. I found some of the commentaries to be more helpful than others. This commentary is currently being revised book by book by new authors. If you are planning to study a particular book of the Bible, I would strongly recommend that you check to see if the revised *New Collegeville Commentary* is available (published by Liturgical Press) which would contain both the text and commentary. The revised commentary on Exodus (which includes the biblical text) has 140 pages.

The Collegeville Bible Handbook is a 300-page short commentary on all 73 books of the Bible. It also contains timelines, maps and illustrations.

If you have any questions about studying the Old Testament in a small group, do not hesitate to contact me. Also, if you decide to use my commentaries, I would love it if you would let me know how they are working for you.

In Christ,

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