

MINING THE MEANING OF THE BIBLE

Beyond the Literal Word
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FOREWORD

A few years ago, my niece, Nancy, was about to celebrate her birthday. I wanted to get her a gift, maybe a book. Her dad asked me, “Do you know about any books that would help Nancy understand the Bible? She is full of questions about it.”

I knew I could find something. I had a lot of catalogs at home with books like that...or at least I thought I did. There were lots of Bibles for kids, but no books that would help Nancy understand the Bible. So, I decided to write a book for Nancy—and for you—so we could go mining for the treasures in the Bible. I gave it to her at her birthday party. She read it aloud. Then all the people who heard her said they wanted a copy.

After that, I shared my book with a lot of other people I knew. I began to use the book in classes, presentations, and workshops for adults: catechists, pastoral ministers, adult education groups in parishes, and people enrolled in Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA) classes.

In my presentations, I noted that the Bible is a whole library of books. The word “bible” comes from the Greek word *biblos*. It simply means “books.” The word “Scripture,” which means “sacred writings,” is often used to describe it as well.

When we are gathered with people of the Christian faith, people who believe in God, or people who have come together to worship, we hear readings from the Bible. It is in this gathering when passages from these books are read aloud that we believe

that the Bible is the word of God. The first part of the Mass is the Liturgy of the Word. The reader (whom we call the lector) proclaims the passages from the Bible, and they are told in such a way that people want to listen; they want to hear the word of God. That means we understand these books to be very important, and they are the way that God speaks to us.

**THE OLD FAMILIAR
ADAGE SAYS:
“GIVE A PERSON A
FISH, AND HE EATS
FOR A DAY.
TEACH A PERSON TO
FISH, AND HE EATS
FOR A LIFETIME.”**

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May this simple book be a beginning for many who will be nourished in their lifetimes by the word of God.

CHAPTER 1

How Were the Books of the Bible Written?

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At first, the books of the Bible weren't books at all. Remember, ancient people didn't have radios, TVs, or newspapers; and certainly no Internet, YouTube, Facebook, cell phones, or texting.

So the only way people knew what was going on was by passing the word to each other, and by telling the stories over and over. This is called the oral tradition. That's how the stories were passed down. So the stories of the Bible were stories of faith, rooted in history and, importantly, inspired by God.

As everyone talked, especially about the stories they didn't understand, they tried to figure out what the stories meant. What were the people supposed to learn from them? All stories teach us something, right? In the Bible, the details of the historical events in a story weren't as important as what God was saying and doing.

In fact, when the ancient people heard the stories, they would ask: "What is God saying to us?" The stories stirred up faith in their hearts. They didn't just know more about God; they knew God better.

So as time went on, friends and families talked about the meanings of the stories. They prayed together to understand the stories better, and of course, they continued to tell the stories. Some stories were told in order to teach us something or explain some aspect of the world and how God relates to us, but the stories not only explained who they were, but also taught about God and why and how God acted on their behalf.

Finally, after a very long time, people—upon being inspired by God—decided to write the stories down. They were afraid the stories would be forgotten, and they knew that the stories would be preserved and saved if they were written. Today, we

know those people of faith were right, because we have those same stories in written form.

It is crucial to remember that God inspired the authors to write the books that we believe to be God's word. And, just like those people thousands of years ago, when we read or hear Bible stories, we want to know what they mean. Trying to understand the stories is a process. It is just like a miner panning for gold. That process takes effort, hard work, and persistence. You have to sift through many parts to find the true gold, to dig to deeper levels, each with its own meaning. These stories have God's inspirational message for us.

Let's review how the Bible came to be written:

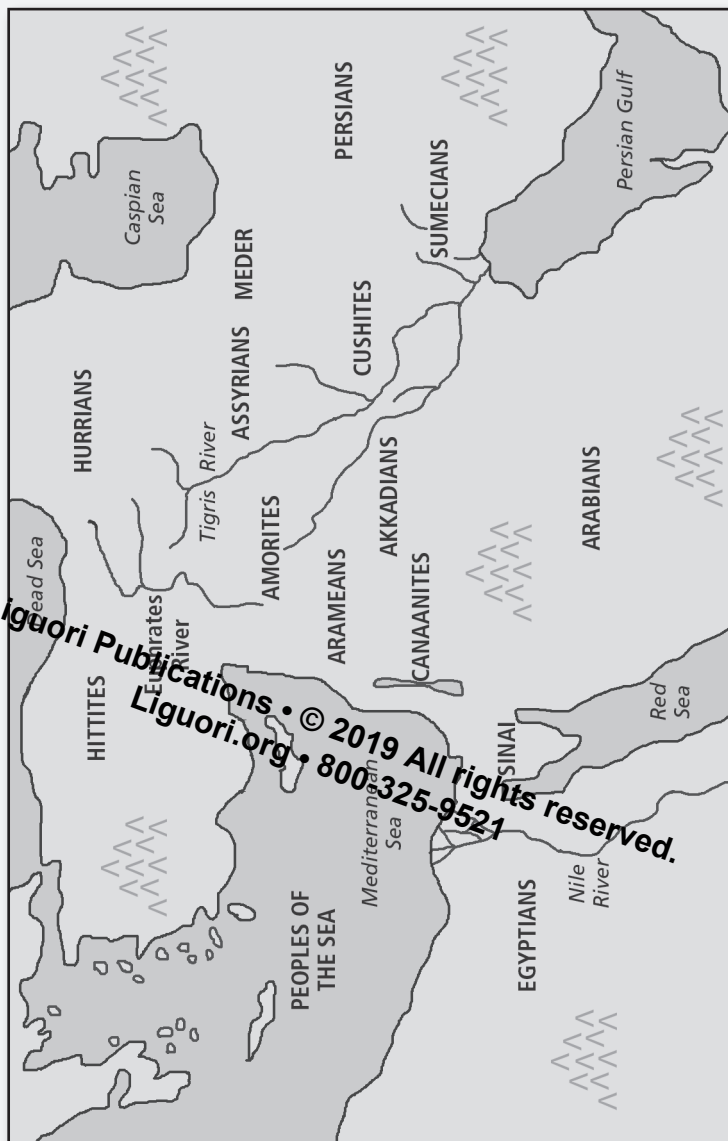
- People noticed what was happening in their lives and in their world.

With inspiration from God, the people then reflected on these events, looking for the meaning of God's actions.

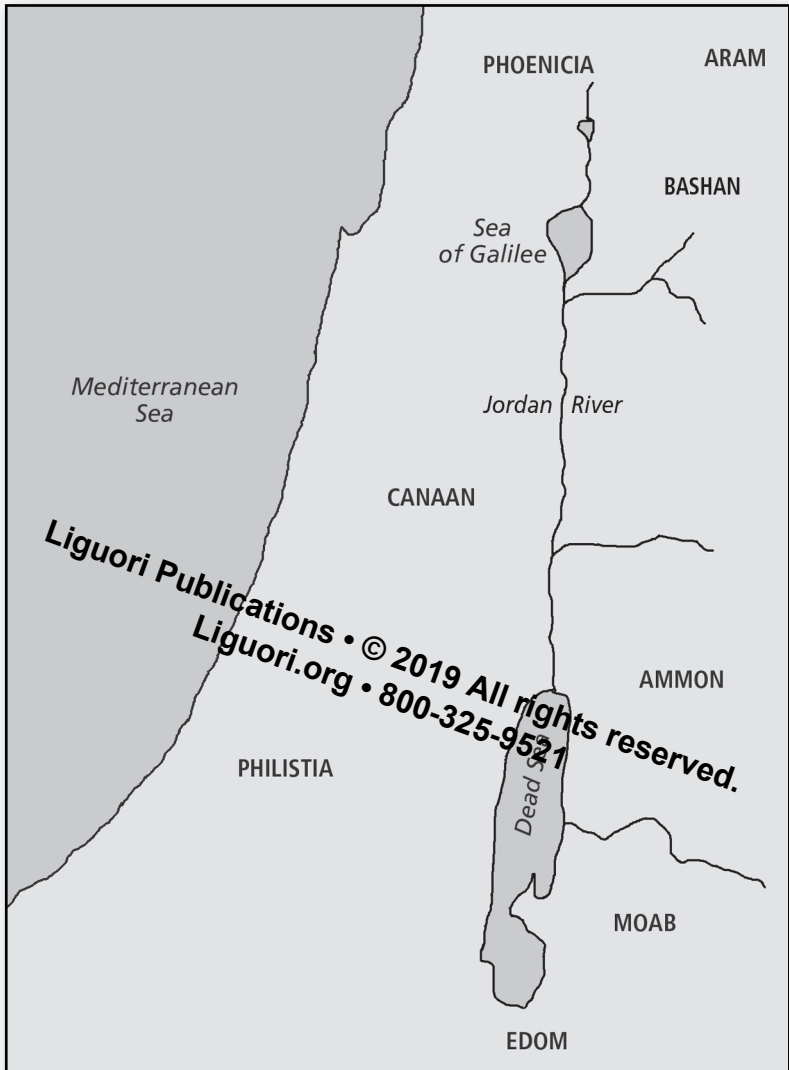
- The meanings became the most important parts of the stories as they were passed down within families and from one generation to the next.
- These God-inspired stories and their meanings were written so that people would not forget them.

God's messages for us are in the Bible, but we must work to mine their meaning. We must look beyond the literal words and go to deeper and deeper levels to understand the meaning.

Peoples of the Old Testament



Israel's Neighboring Cities



Important Places in the Life of Jesus

1. Nazareth
Luke 1-2
2. Bethlehem
Luke 2:11
3. Jordan
Matthew 3:13
4. Sea of Galilee
Mark 1:16-19
5. Cana
John 2:1-11
6. Sea of Galilee
Matthew 14:22-23
7. Tysar
John 1:28
8. Capernaum
John 6:17
9. Nain
Luke 7:11-17
10. Bethsaida
Luke 9:10-17
11. Caesarea-Philippi
Mark 8:27
12. Mount Tabor
Mark 9:2
13. Jericho
*Mark 10:46-52;
and Luke 19:1-10*
14. Bethany
John 11:1-44
15. Jerusalem
John 19 and Matthew 28
16. Emmaus
Luke 24:13-35

