

DAILY BIBLE READING WITH THE CHURCH¹

I

I. INTRODUCTION

The importance and fruitfulness of reading Holy Scripture daily is a fact that needs no proof. It is a practice that continues to grow more widespread among the faithful, a spiritual exercise valued ever more highly by priests and religious. The Holy See has given clergy and people alike every encouragement to steep their souls in the word of God in order to find there a pure and never-failing source of divine truth and spiritual strength. It is hoped that the reading plan suggested here will prove helpful in bringing this aim nearer its fulfilment. The two-year cycle of readings for the Old Testament is based on the Church year, while the New Testament plan presents the various books in their approximate order of composition. Although originally intended as an aid in planning the daily public reading of the Scriptures in religious communities, it will serve equally well as a guide for private Bible-reading.

THE OLD TESTAMENT

A Two-year Cycle Based on the Church Year

First Year			
<i>Book</i>	<i>Days</i>	<i>Book</i>	<i>Days</i>
ADVENT AND CHRISTMASTIDE		AUGUST	
<i>Isaia</i>	45	<i>Proverbs</i>	19
		<i>Song of Songs (Canticle of Canticles)</i>	3
		<i>Ecclesiastes</i>	6
SEPTUAGESIMA AND LENT		SEPTEMBER—OCTOBER	
<i>Genesis</i> I—IV ; VI—IX ; XI—XXV ; XXXVII—		II <i>Paralipomenon</i>	27
L	39	I <i>Esdras</i>	7
<i>Job</i>	21 (22)	<i>Nehemias</i> (II <i>Esdras</i>) I—II ; IV—X ;	
<i>Exodus</i> I—XXXVI ; XXXIX—XL	33	XII—XV	10
		II <i>Machabees</i>	18

¹ Reprinted with permission from *Sponsa Regis*, xxiii (1952)m No. 6.

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<i>Book</i>	<i>Days</i>	<i>Book</i>	<i>Days</i>
EASTERTIDE AND AFTER		NOVEMBER	
<i>Leviticus</i> I-X; XII; XVI; XIX; XXI-XXVII	17	<i>Michaeas</i>	4
<i>Numbers</i> V-VI; VIII-XIV; XVI-XXV; XXVII-XXXII; XXXV-XXXVI	20	<i>Sophonias</i>	2
<i>Josue</i> I-XI; XVIII; XXII-XXIV	12	<i>Habacuc</i>	2
<i>Judges</i>	20	<i>Daniel</i>	15
<i>I Kings</i> (I <i>Samuel</i>)	25	<i>Abdias</i>	1
<i>I Paralipomenon</i> X-XXII; XXVIII-XXIX	11	<i>Aggaeus</i>	1
		<i>Zacharias</i>	7

Second Year

<i>Book</i>	<i>Days</i>	<i>Book</i>	<i>Days</i>
ADVENT AND CHRISTMASTIDE		JULY-AUGUST	
<i>Psalms</i>	45	<i>Ecclesiasticus</i>	40
		<i>Wisdom</i>	13
SEPTUAGESIMA AND LENT		SEPTEMBER	
<i>Deuteronomy</i> I-XXI; XXVI-XXXIV	28	<i>Judith</i>	11
<i>Jeremias</i>	46 (47)	<i>I Machabees</i>	23
<i>Lamentations</i>	4		
<i>Baruch</i>	6		
EASTERTIDE AND AFTER		OCTOBER-NOVEMBER	
<i>Ruth</i>	3	<i>Jonas</i>	2
<i>II Kings</i> (II <i>Samuel</i>)	22	<i>Amos</i>	5
<i>III Kings</i>	24	<i>Osee</i>	6
<i>IV Kings</i>	25	<i>Nahum</i>	2
<i>Tobias</i>	7	<i>Ezechiel</i>	39
<i>Esther</i>	9	<i>Joel</i>	3
		<i>Malachy</i>	2

Neither a plan of daily Old Testament readings nor one patterned on the Church year is a novelty. Examples of the former can be found in many editions of the Bible. The best-known example of the latter is the Roman Breviary. It provides Old Testament readings for each season and period of the Church year, except for the two periods devoted especially to commemorating "Christ with us"—the seasons of Christmas and Easter, when the regular Scripture readings are taken from the New Testament.

But there are several reasons for suggesting a new reading programme. The readings given in the Breviary, on the one hand, are necessarily fragmentary and very incomplete. For as its name suggests, this official prayer book of the Church is designed as a comparatively brief compact manual of daily prayer. So in its Bible readings it aims at covering only the high points of Old Testament

history, prophecy and doctrine, and their fulfilment and perfection in the New Testament, that is to say, in Christ. Thus, even for those who recite the Divine Office, it would be of great benefit to have the Old Testament read in full, and over and over through the years, like the Breviary itself. The Bible, too, could then become a vade-mecum, growing ever more familiar, and as a result the Breviary readings and especially the *Psalms* would take on new richness and meaning. Moreover, it is very difficult if not impossible to gain a satisfactory understanding or appreciation of the New Testament without first acquiring a close familiarity with the no less divinely inspired Old Testament. For the New Law has been built on this Old Law, which Christ came not to destroy, but to fulfil (*cf.* Mt. v.17-18).

On the other hand, the various arrangements of the Old Testament for daily reading suggested in the editions of the Bible usually take the sacred books in the Bible's own order, from *Genesis* to *Machabees*. As a result the books are left entirely unrelated to the Church's programme of Bible-reading in the Divine Office, a programme that is sensitive to the changing seasons of the liturgical year. Moreover, considering the length of the Old Testament, such plans tend to be somewhat burdensome, particularly as guides for public reading. The time itself would perhaps not seem long if the whole Old Testament were graphic narrative, like the book of *Tobias*, or the book of *Genesis*. But there are the numerous chapters of Mosaic Law, the profound and mysterious oracles of the prophets, and the long series of maxims and proverbs presented in the didactic or wisdom books. Even when read privately, these portions of Scripture lend themselves best to leisured and reflective reading. This difficulty of length can hardly be met satisfactorily unless the Old Testament readings are distributed over a two-year period.

In the plan presented here each day's public readings will not take more than seven or eight minutes. The aim has been to include a reasonably complete account of Old Testament history in the first year of the cycle, and along with this as large a sampling of the prophetic and wisdom books as there is time for. For example, I and II *Paralipomenon* are read instead of II, III and IV *Kings*, since the period covered is the same, but I and II *Paralipomenon*, being considerably briefer, allow more time for the reading of non-historical books. For this same reason, books like *Deuteronomy*, *Ruth* and *Tobias*, which are somewhat supplementary to the other historical books, are also reserved for the second year. During the second year there are much lengthier readings from the prophets than during the first, but much shorter ones from the historical books. Interestingly, though, many if not all of the prophecies contain reflections on sacred history or

details not given in the general account. The reading of *Jeremias* and the *Lamentations*, for example, gives a much clearer picture of the destruction of Jerusalem and the events which preceded it than do either *Kings* or *Paralipomenon*. Similarly, *Wisdom* and *Ecclesiasticus* present many striking reflections on Jewish history.

It remains now to indicate how the plan outlined above follows the general lines which the Church has adopted in the Breviary. The first series of readings begins with *Isaias*, the glory of the Old Testament and the greatest of its prophets, whose message keynotes the Church's Advent preparation and even her Christmas celebration, as can be seen in both the Breviary and the Missal. Then comes *Genesis*, the opening of sacred history—the history of mankind's salvation, which is sacramentally re-enacted each liturgical year. (In the Divine Office *Genesis* is begun on Septuagesima Sunday, at the start of the Easter cycle.) *Job*, who foreshadows the suffering Christ, is read during Lent,¹ and then *Exodus*, which is appropriate for both Lent and Easter, since it opens with the first Pasch or Passover and the deliverance of the Jews from Egypt. The historical account continues with *Leviticus* and *Numbers*, *Josue* and *Judges*, *I Kings* and *I Paralipomenon*, until August, which the Church devotes to the wisdom books (here *Proverbs*, the *Canticle of Canticles* and *Ecclesiastes*). Then there is a return to sacred history with *II Paralipomenon*, *I* and *II Esdras* and *II Machabees*.

This unfolding of the history of God's chosen people is both an image and a beginning of the Church's own development and destiny in time and eternity and in each year and era of her existence. The New Israel, the Kingdom of God, is the reality pointed to by the Jewish race under its kings. The growth and flowering of that earlier kingdom take on new meaning in the light of the Holy Spirit's descent at Pentecost. The kingdom's subsequent decline, the overthrow and restoration of Jerusalem and its temple, and the Machabean wars, all preparing the way for Messianic times, typify the Church's struggles, reverses and renewal, and her expectation of Christ's return in grace (at Christmas) and in glory (at the end of time). *Leviticus* and the other books of Mosaic Law lay the groundwork of the New Law of grace and love, while the wisdom literature affords us a better insight into the new life that is ours in Christ, who is eternal Wisdom.

November is the month of the prophets, leading up to *Isaias* at Advent. In their writings Old Testament revelation reaches its climax, for they present its most sublime moral and doctrinal instructions and speak most clearly of the coming Redeemer. Here as nearly as possible

¹ In the Breviary *Job* is read during September as a figure of the trials and struggles of the Church.

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the chronological order has been followed: *Michaeas*, *Sophonias* and *Habacuc* (before the deportation and exile of the Jews); *Daniel* (during the exile at Babylon); *Abdias*, *Aggaeus* and *Zacharias* (after the exile). These are prophets of the southern kingdom (Juda) and are included here because the history of the northern kingdom (Israel) is detailed only in III and IV *Kings*, which are read during the second year.

The second year begins with the book of *Psalms*, a book of prayers rather than readings, yet appropriate as Advent reading instead of *Isaias*, considering its numerous prophecies of the Messiah, His redemptive work, and His Kingdom, the Church (the Messianic Psalms, as they are called).¹ Next is *Deuteronomy*, wherein Moses before his death recalls the whole history of the Passover and the precepts of the Law given from Mount Sinai. Then during Lent come *Jeremias* and his *Lamentations*, followed by the prophecy of his disciple *Baruch*. Sacred history is then resumed with *Ruth* (corresponding to the period of *Judges*), II, III and IV *Kings* (corresponding to I and II *Paralipomenon*, but giving the history of the northern as well as the southern kingdom of the Jews), *Tobias* and *Esther* (reflecting the period of the exile and after). July as well as August of the second year are devoted to wisdom readings (*Wisdom* and *Ecclesiasticus*), with *Judith* and I *Machabees* following in September. This leaves October and November for the reading of the remaining prophets of both the northern and southern kingdoms. And again an effort has been made to take them in chronological order: *Jonas*, *Osee* and *Nahum* (before the exile); *Ezechiel* (during the exile); *Joel* and *Malachy* (after the exile).

One further suggestion. It will prove a refreshing change and an aid to attention and understanding if these readings (and those in the New Testament) are done in Mgr Ronald Knox's version (published in three volumes by Sheed & Ward).

THE NEW TESTAMENT

A Chronological Arrangement

Book	Days	Book	Days
I <i>Thessalonians</i>	5	<i>Acts</i>	45
II <i>Thessalonians</i>	3	<i>Jude</i>	1
<i>James</i>	5	I <i>Peter</i>	5
<i>Matthew</i>	48	<i>Hebrews</i>	15
<i>Galatians</i>	6	I <i>Timothy</i>	6
I <i>Corinthians</i>	21	<i>Titus</i>	3

¹ Cf. Lk. xxxiv. 44-7 (" . . . all that was written of Me in the Law of Moses, and in the Prophets, and in the *Psalms* . . ."). It is as the Church's prayer *par excellence*, not as readings, that the entire *Psalter* is said each week in the Breviary. But even those who recite the Divine Office will find it useful to read the *Psalms* again in the vernacular, while for others the *Psalter* will be quite indispensable as part of their general Bible-reading.

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<i>Book</i>	<i>Days</i>	<i>Book</i>	<i>Days</i>
II <i>Corinthians</i>	14 (15)	II <i>Timothy</i>	4
<i>Romans</i>	20	II <i>Peter</i>	3
<i>Mark</i>	30	I <i>John</i> (Epistle)	5
<i>Colossians</i>	4	<i>John</i> (Gospel)	36
<i>Ephesians</i>	7	II <i>John</i>	1
<i>Philemon</i>	1	III <i>John</i>	1
<i>Philippians</i>	4	<i>Apocalypse</i>	22
<i>Luke</i>	50		

It is comparatively easy to read the whole New Testament within a year, and three or four minutes of public reading daily will be sufficient for following the plan given here. With the New Testament, plans for daily readings are a great deal more numerous (and probably more widely used) than for the Old. And while any one of them can very profitably be followed, the outline given here may prove somewhat more helpful, since it takes the books in their chronological order.

This difference should not be exaggerated, however. The chronology of the New Testament writings is difficult to establish exactly, and often a close estimate is the most that can be obtained. Then, too, the New Testament itself presents many of the books in their order of composition.¹ Still, there are two advantages in a more chronological arrangement of the New Testament. It should certainly be helpful in interpreting and understanding the different books to have them read, as far as possible, in the order in which they were written. Secondly, passing back and forth from the didactic or doctrinal books (the Epistles) to the historical (the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles) and finally to the prophetic (the *Apocalypse*), from the Pauline to the non-Pauline writings, gives the reading of the New Testament some of the variety the Church's reading-plan for the Old Testament possesses.

The only direct connection this reading arrangement has with the liturgical year is that it ends with the prophetic *Apocalypse* (which parallels the Sunday Masses and Breviary texts for November) and begins with I and II *Thessalonians*, which, in emphasizing Christ's second coming, fit in well with the Mass of the First Sunday of Advent.

¹ The four Gospels, for example, were composed in that order, St John's three Epistles and the *Apocalypse* very likely came last. Among St Paul's Epistles, *Ephesians*, *Colossians*, *Philippians* and *Philemon* were written during his imprisonment at Rome and so are fittingly grouped together in the Bible. But St Paul's earliest Epistles, I and II *Thessalonians*, are given eighth and ninth. *Galatians* consists of an earlier or rough-draft presentation of the theme that is fully developed in *Romans*, namely, justification, or how mankind attains salvation. Yet *Romans* stands first (by reason of its dignity and importance) and *Galatians* fourth. And though the Gospels are arranged in the order in which they were written, the composition of each of them was separated from the others by the writing of a number of the Epistles.

Otherwise, except for individual chapters scattered over the whole New Testament, no single book is really more appropriate for any particular week or season of the Church year than another.

It is true that in the Divine Office the Pauline Epistles are read at Christmas-time, and the *Acts of the Apostles*, the *Apocalypse* and the Catholic Epistles are read after Easter. But these readings obviously comprise the whole New Testament, with the exception of the four Gospels, which are read and commented on throughout the year at the third nocturn of Matins. Thus, these two seasons of the Church year are simply setting before us in its entirety the New Dispensation, the New Law, as the fulfillment of the promises and the foreshadowings of the Old. We cannot expect to find within such a limited period a satisfactory norm for readings that are to extend throughout the year. But any disadvantage arising from this circumstance is compensated for by our being able to follow the New Testament in its chronological development.

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To be concluded