

Teaching Guide for
Exploring
the Story of Israel

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Introduction



THIS COURSE AND THE DISCOVERING PROGRAM

Christians cannot overestimate the importance of understanding the Old Testament (Jewish Scriptures). Other than their inherent value as God's revelation and as a story of faith, these Scriptures provide a rich source and a background for understanding Jesus. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us that "in various times in the past and in differing ways, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets. Now, in these last days, God has spoken to us through Jesus, the Son of God" (adapted from Heb. 1:1-2). Ignorance of the Old Testament greatly impoverishes our understanding of Jesus, the one recognized first by the Jews as the Christ.

Exploring the Story of Israel acquaints students with the God who is first revealed in the Old Testament and who is with us today. The activities in this course help reinforce the notion that wherever these young people are, God is present and active. The story of the people of Israel and their relationship with God is a story of the journey of faith. That story in turn can be connected to the story of each of us and our journey with God. By the close of this exploration of the Old Testament, the young people should be able

to find their way through that long and sometimes puzzling collection of writings and draw on it to sustain their prayer and guide their decision making. The young people should also approach the Bible with increased confidence and with a fresher understanding of the vital role it can play in their life.

Exploring the Story of Israel can be offered at any time of the year. The content of this course does not depend on information or understandings gained from other Discovering Program courses. However, *Exploring the Bible* can serve as useful preparation for it. Additionally, *Understanding Myself*, *Becoming Friends*, and *Learning to Communicate* can help build a foundation of comfort and communication that can make the exploration of the Scriptures more fruitful. This course can prepare the students to benefit more fully from the other Discovering courses that use the Bible, such as *Meeting Jesus*, *Praying*, *Celebrating the Eucharist*, and *Being Catholic*. If you wish further information about the Discovering Program, which consists of fourteen courses, consult the coordinator's manual.

The course does not readily lend itself to daylong or other types of protracted schedules. Though such settings might allow the students to learn about the various kinds of books of the Bible relative to their personal concerns, the contents of this course are more amenable to weekly or every-other-week sessions.

The six session plans of this course are each designed for a 1-hour meeting. If your group is scheduled to be together for more than an hour, the sessions can be extended with the optional approaches suggested at the end of each session plan. Also consult these approaches as alternative strategies if your teaching style or the students' learning style calls for changes.

The time estimates suggested for the session steps are based on a group size of about fifteen participants. If your group has considerably more or fewer members, you may need to make minor adjustments in the session plans. This course, like all Discovering courses, works well with larger groups, but in such cases you will have less opportunity to address the students' individual contributions and needs.

BACKGROUND

The Young Adolescent and This Course

Young adolescents are concerned with belonging in new ways to the communities of which they are already a part, such as family and church, and fitting in with new and often threatening communities-in-the-making, such as a different school and unfamiliar groups of peers. The peer world, which counts for so much in their eyes, naturally captures the lion's share of their concern and can have an almost tyrannical dominance over them. Young adolescents imagine that the whole peer world is watching and critically judging them. In response to such self-consciousness, this course announces that these young people are the center of God's concern and that God watches over them, not critically and judgmentally but fondly and lovingly.

Young adolescents' identity is closely tied to their multiple relationships—with their peers, with their parents and other family members, and with significant adults beyond the family. In the midst of these various influences, nurturing the faith identity of young adolescents presents a challenge. Yet helping them establish a faith identity is the privilege of their parish teachers and local church. This faith identity should be grounded on the biblical understanding that human beings are called into existence by, are sustained by, and find their ultimate meaning in God.

This course invites young adolescents, who spend much of their time striving to fit in, to understand and appreciate that they first belong to God. And that as far as God is concerned, they *always* fit in. The course reveals to them and reminds them that they are called to live in a relationship with a God who loves them, addresses them by name, challenges them to choose fidelity, and unconditionally accepts them. This is the meaning of the Covenant and the Promise, which are central themes of the Old Testament.

Exploring the Story of Israel welcomes young people to identify with those whom God first addressed, the Chosen People. The Old Testament says to each young person: "You are loved. You belong here. You are somebody." It also issues the challenge to live and choose as God's beloved sons and daughters.

The Theology of This Course

Although the Catholic church shares many beliefs with other Christian churches, Catholicism's understanding of the Bible—its interpretation and its use—distinguishes our church from some other Christian denominations. Catholic faith and practice are based on foundational beliefs about the Bible as God's revelation to humankind.

This Course and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

All Discovering courses rely on the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* as a primary resource and a guide to theological accuracy. The *Catechism* can also serve as a valuable source of both information and inspiration for the teacher. We encourage you to review and reflect on certain sections of the *Catechism* as you prepare to teach.

The *Catechism* discusses revelation in the Old Testament, and Jesus as the fullness of God's self-revelation (nos. 50–73). Next, it examines the transmission of revelation to and through the church (nos. 74–100). Then it documents the church's understanding of inspiration and the truth of the Scriptures (nos. 101–119). Finally, it explains the church's understanding of the canon of Scripture, the relationship between the Old and New Testaments, and their place in the church's life (nos. 120–141).

This brief treatment of the sacred Scriptures set out in the *Catechism* provides a valuable starting point for understanding the church's view of the Scriptures. This course takes its lead from the *Catechism*, and incorporates the following understandings.

The Bible is inspired by God. Revelation is God’s self-communication to us. God’s revelation is, of course, documented in the Bible. God seeks to be known by us and so takes the first step by communicating with us person to person. We cannot be sure about God’s identity, and truly know it, from observations alone. We can only know and love God because God has made the first move; God has chosen to be known and loved.

God chooses to be revealed to us. And the kind of God who is revealed outstrips our wildest imagination and best hope. God comes to us as Creator, yes, but also as friend, companion, confidant, and parent. This is an amazing grace and wonderful surprise.

God’s self-revelation is only part of the story: to complete the story, that revelation has to be freely received. The person who possesses the grace to say yes to God enters into a knowing, loving, grateful lifetime of engagement in human existence at its richest and deepest levels.

The first receivers of God’s revelation in recorded history were the people of Israel. And the first great conversation of revelation and response is documented in the Old Testament and then, through the Jewish people, in the New Testament. Taken together, these sacred writings constitute God’s written revelation—a written record inspired by God.

The Bible is true. Catholics accept the Bible as the privileged disclosure of God’s inner life and of God’s historical relationship with humanity. The message of God’s creative and salvific love is constant and consistent; throughout the Bible the same themes unfold through a variety of human authors, eras, and situations.

Catholics do not interpret the Bible as if every word in it is literally and historically true. Although the truth of the Bible endures, Catholics understand that the Scriptures consist of special forms of literature that embody and carry truths that can speak to all people of all times. The Bible teaches the truth that leads to and makes possible a whole and holy life with God and with the human community.

If parts of the Bible occasionally seem in contradiction or internally at war with one another, the problem lies not in God’s revelation but in the reader’s understanding of it. For example, readers are often bothered by the discrepancy between biblical stories that portray God as vindictive or harshly punitive and biblical stories that picture God as a tenderhearted spouse or a vigilant parent. The image of God as vindictive actually reflects the self-image of a people who were learning about God. It took God a long time, so to speak, to crack through the misconceptions and narrow mind-sets of a fallible people and forge a clearer picture of God within the Jewish and, later, the Christian communities. Throughout the Scriptures God’s pursuit of people is often met by their dim awareness and faltering attempts to first understand and then respond. The long story of Israel and the relatively brief story of God-with-us in Jesus gradually reveal the truth that God’s constant will is for our happiness, a divine desire to which people only erratically respond.

Biblical scholarship has enriched our understanding of how the Bible was formed over the centuries from the earliest oral traditions, beginning some two thousand years or more before the time of Jesus, to the latest editing and rearranging, 100 B.C.E. for the Old Testament and about 100 C.E. for the New Testament. (Throughout this course the initials B.C.E., meaning “before the common era,” and C.E., meaning “common era,” are preferred over B.C. and A.D.) This scholarship has also shed light on the cultures and the traditions in which various portions of the Bible were written, the languages that were used, and the people and the situations in which the written words were first generated.

The Catholic church’s attention to biblical scholarship stands side-by-side with its unflagging belief in the Bible as God’s inspired self-revelation. Catholics believe that their understanding of the truth of the Bible is ensured, not threatened, by sound scholarship. Catholics (and mainline Protestants) believe that the literal interpretation of the Bible (adopted by Fundamentalists) actually diminishes the majesty of God’s revealed truth. Catholics are at their best when they rely on the collective experience of the community of believers mediated through the gatherings of the church in various councils, the magisterium, and the lives of believers to interpret the truth of the Scriptures.

The Bible is foundational. For Catholics the Bible and Tradition form the foundation on which the church’s faith is built. Catholic identity is found in the essence of the Gospel—the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus. This gives meaning and focus to all that Catholics believe. Catholic teaching is based consistently on biblical principles. The church’s sacramental life, moral teachings, and spirituality are all deeply rooted in the Scriptures and have evolved in ways consistent with the spirit of the Bible.

Fidelity to the spirit of the Bible is one criterion—along with sacred Tradition and the magisterium—that Catholics use in evaluating faith experience.

The Bible is living. For Catholics the Bible is a living expression of God’s word, that is, it is as vital today as it was in the past. When Catholics read the Bible, they read it to understand not only how God spoke to the Jews or to the early church but also how God speaks to all people of all times, to all who share the human condition. The Bible continues to be new for people of each generation, and people continue to interact with the Bible as they bring it to bear on new life situations and experiences. In concert with the faith tradition of the church, the Bible continues to provide the people of God direction for living.

Teaching This Course

Each course in the Discovering Program consists of two components: a teaching guide like this one that fully describes the course goals, objectives, content, and session plans, and a companion student booklet. The booklet

is not a conventional textbook, in that the students are never expected to read it outside of the sessions. In fact, substantial reading is never required as a regular feature of the learning process. Nor does the booklet look like a textbook; for instance, it contains no recognizable chapters as one would expect in a standard text. The student booklet for each Discovering course, rather, is to be used only in conjunction with the session plans described in the teaching guide. It is effective in this way because of the following features:

- The booklet provides a kind of running summary of the themes and essential information that are presented through the engaging session plans. This gives students a record of what they have learned in the course. It is also a helpful feature when a student misses a session; at the next session, you can ask him or her to briefly review relevant pages from the booklet.
- The booklet uses sidebars related to the main topics to draw the young people further into the material and enrich their learning. You may use the sidebars in any way that seems appropriate—perhaps as discussion-starters, topics for journal entries, or simply focal points for a brief silent reflection.
- The booklet includes an occasional personal reflection or journal-writing activity that students are asked to complete quietly on their own.
- The booklet presents activities designed for use in small groups—such as discussion-starters, role-plays, and vignettes.
- Finally, the booklet’s attractive design—using original art, bold colors, interesting type, evocative photos, and so on—is intended to support the total learning process.

Student Booklet Sidebars

The student booklet includes a number of bits of interesting information that are not central elements of the course content. Set off graphically from the other booklet materials, these sidebars are generally not referred to in the session plans. They are included in the booklet to spark the students’ interest and imagination. As you prepare for each session, reflect on the sidebars and decide if you wish to use any of them in your teaching.

Student Booklet Bound into the Teaching Guide

For your convenience and easy reference, a complete copy of the student booklet for *Exploring the Story of Israel’s* bound into the back of this guide. You may find it helpful to tab or mark the booklet pages related to a given session as you prepare to teach it. That will make it easy to flip back and forth between the guide and the booklet.

Student Booklet Pages in the Session Plans

As a visual aid, reduced versions of some student booklet pages are reproduced in the left-hand margin of the session plans. Such pages appear at the beginning of the related instructions. If more than one booklet page is involved in an activity, only the first of those pages is reproduced in the margin.

Prayer Experiences

Establish a prayer area within the room where you will meet with your group. This area will become a focal point for a time of prayer during each session. An enthroned Bible in a designated place in the room attests to the importance of the Scriptures and of shared prayer. Items such as a candle and a plant or flowers are recommended for the enthroned Bible.

Prayer opportunities are part of each session. Everyone is called to prayer through simple words and actions, such as lighting a candle, moving to a new location in the room, asking for silence, or playing music conducive to silent reflection. These simple gestures help settle everyone down and center them for reflection and prayer.

The prayer experiences in this course have been created to establish an attitude of reverence for the word of God. The students are given numerous opportunities to use their Bible as the source for personal prayer and reflection. Young people generally respond when their leader creates a tone that fosters intimate and reverent prayer.

The Biblical Framework for This Course

Although the students may have some experience with the Old Testament, it is assumed that they have little coherent experience with it as a privileged story (session 1), as a story that truly creates and defines a people of God and reveals the God who calls. Like all great stories, this one is not just about a defined people but is also about us. In the Old Testament, each of us is addressed. We are offered life with God in this world (session 2); we are summoned to a journey of faith (session 3); we are called to a Covenant with God (session 4); we live in the promise of God’s Reign (session 5); and we receive the prophetic call to repentance and renewal (session 6).

More specifically, here are the Jewish events and people as they are explored by each session of this course:

- *Session 1.* The Scriptures tell the story of God’s choice of a people called to identify themselves as God’s own. Their faith story consists of centuries of oral and written tradition. This story of God’s people comprises the forty-six books of the Old Testament.
- *Session 2.* In the first Creation story, Israel affirms its belief that God gave us a world, and we are free to choose our relationship with God.
- *Session 3.* Israel perceives itself as a family founded on unshakable faith. The family saga of Abraham and Sarah is Israel’s great story of faithful forebears. Abraham and Sarah are Israel’s first parents, and their legacy is one of steadfast faith.
- *Session 4.* The story of the Exodus and the formulation of the Sinai Covenant (the Ten Commandments) occupies this session. Initially, the Israelites learn that God keeps the Promise once made to the patriarchs and that God is on the side of the people. The Covenant establishes their relationship with God and creates them as a people of God. Over time, as Israel endures a desert sojourn and establishes a kingdom, the struggle to be a covenanted people continues.

- *Session 5.* In the story of David, Israel learns again that its “business” is faithfulness to its Covenant with God. It is from the house and family of David that God’s Reign will be finally and irrevocably established.
- *Session 6.* Israel, which is summoned to faithfulness by its prophets, survives a humiliating and cleansing Exile and renews and refines its understanding of itself as a people of God.

Bibles for the Students

The Bible is an essential component for this course. Ideally, the students should use a Bible that they own. Determine if the students have received a personal Bible as part of an earlier program or course. If not, see if the parish school of religion can purchase Bibles or subsidize their purchase. Or perhaps parents or sponsors could give them as gifts.

If this is not possible, try to provide a Bible for each of your students to use during this course. It is best that everyone have the same translation. If this is not possible, try to divide your group into smaller groups of people with the same translation. Comparing the various translations can add a further dimension to your discussions throughout the course, though it may slightly complicate some activities and discussions.

The following translations are among the best available for Catholic young people:

- The New American Bible (1991). This version is a modern translation of the Scriptures that is faithful to ancient sources. It is approved for use during the liturgy of the word and therefore will be somewhat familiar to the students.
- The New Jerusalem Bible (1990). This translation uses contemporary language, comes closest to using inclusive language, and provides theological insights through extensive notations that accompany the text. It is also an approved translation for use in the liturgy of the word.
- The New Revised Standard Version (1989). This translation uses gender-inclusive language when such use is consistent with rigorous biblical scholarship.
- The Good News Bible: The Bible in Today’s English Version (1993). This translation attempts to capture and convey the meaning set forth in the original texts, in language that is accessible to a broad readership. It is truer to the original meanings than paraphrased versions, and it is presented in language that young people can more readily understand. Most students respond enthusiastically to this translation. It can be obtained from the Catholic Bible Press, a division of Thomas Nelson.

Some of the scriptural excerpts are cited as adapted. Such passages generally have been adapted to make the language more accessible and to avoid exclusive language.

Scripture Search Activities

This course is designed to engage the students in an active exploration of the Bible, in order to increase their comfort with it and their skills in using it. Toward that end, it employs a number of Scripture search activities. The

Scripture search technique is used in a variety of ways so that it may remain fresh for the students. Our conviction is that experiencing this type of activity, which involves delving into the Bible and actually using it, will help the young people come to know the Scriptures more completely than they could by just talking about them.

Some Preparation Needs

It is recommended that you obtain a wall map of the ancient Middle East. Although a small map is included in the student booklet, and maps can be readily found in most Bibles, a large wall map would be a useful addition to the course materials. Many Catholic schools own such maps, and you may be able to borrow one to use with this course. Or teachers in those schools might advise you on where such maps can be purchased.

Before teaching this course, read each session plan and become comfortable with the learning strategies. If you are unfamiliar with the process of leading guided reflections, you might want to prepare for the one in session 2 by recording yourself on audiotape reading the directions, and then playing the tape back so that you can hear your own voice and evaluate your pacing, tone, and so on.

Think about the Bible in your own prayer life. Identify the forms of prayer with which you are most familiar and that you find most helpful, and consider how you might share these with your students. Also, feel free to share with your students scriptural passages you have memorized and love. Finally, you may want to regularly connect this study of the Bible with the proclamation of the word at the celebration of the Eucharist in your parish.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Curriculums take on greater clarity, direction, and purpose if they are described in terms of goals and objectives. This observation is based on a commonsense principle: We have a difficult time getting somewhere if we do not know where we are going. Educators who design learning experiences must identify their destination as a first step in determining how to get there. The statement of goals and objectives is a practical way to identify the desired outcomes for a program.

In the Discovering Program, goals and objectives are used in the following ways.

Goals. Goals are broad statements of what we wish to accomplish—learning outcomes we hope to achieve. The coordinator’s manual for the Discovering Program provides the goals for all the courses in the curriculum. Each course within the total program also includes a statement of its goals. The goals often have an idealistic quality, inviting the teacher to reflect on how the course relates to the personal and faith development of the young people. At the same time, the course goals are realistic, measurable, and attainable. As a teacher, at the end of the course, you should be able to look back and determine if you have in fact achieved the course goals.

Objectives. Objectives are statements that define how to get to the goals. They name specific tasks that must be accomplished if the goals are to be achieved. The coordinator’s manual identifies the objectives for each course in the curriculum. Each course, in turn, supplies a clear statement of objectives for each session in the course.

The Goals and Objectives of *Exploring the Story of Israel*

Goals

The goals for this course in the Discovering Program are as follows:

- that the students recognize the Old Testament as God’s self-revelation
- that they begin to read the Old Testament in the light of the New Testament
- that they experience the Old Testament as meaningful for their life
- that they develop skill in using the Old Testament

Objectives

Each session has its own objectives, which will help realize the course goals. The objectives of *Exploring the Story of Israel* that follow are phrased as tasks for the young people.

Session 1: “A Story”

The students will do the following:

- identify the Bible as God’s self-revelation
- become proficient at finding biblical references
- develop a sense of reverence for the Scriptures as God’s word

Session 2: “A World”

The students will do the following:

- identify the two Creation stories as reflections on the relationship between God and creatures
- recognize that God is Creator and Lord of all creation
- realize that humans are free to choose a relationship with God

Session 3: “A Family”

The students will do the following:

- identify the ancestors of the people of Israel as people of faith
- identify themselves as inheritors of the faith of Abraham and Sarah

Session 4: “A Covenant”

The students will do the following:

- see themselves as people called to a covenant relationship with God
- identify Moses as the one whom God chose to lead the Israelites to freedom from slavery
- understand the Ten Commandments as expressions of a covenant between God and a people

Session 5: “A Kingdom”

The students will do the following:

- identify David as a leader who struggled to remain faithful to God’s Covenant
- recognize their own call to be faithful people
- identify the wisdom books of the Bible as expressions of heartfelt prayer and reflection

Session 6: “A Future”

The students will do the following:

- identify the Old Testament prophets as people who spoke for God
- recognize that faithfulness to God’s Covenant requires the work of justice
- identify themselves as people called to do the works of justice today

RESOURCES

The following books provide helpful background and enrichment for this course:

- Brown, Raymond E. *Responses to 101 Questions on the Bible* New York: Paulist Press, 1990. This small book provides helpful perspectives on frequently asked questions about the Bible. It also discusses issues about literal interpretations of the Bible, which are common today.
- Brueggemann, Walter. *The Bible Makes Sense* Revised edition. Winona, MN: Saint Mary’s Press, 1997. This little book presents the Bible as sacred literature that functions as a partner in a lifelong dialog between the believer and God.
- Gilles, Anthony E. *The People of the Book: The Story Behind the Old Testament*. [Cincinnati]: Saint Anthony Messenger Press, 1983. This readable, slim volume clearly explores the development of the Old Testament and provides an introductory blueprint that encourages further study.