

A Tutorial on Sacred Scripture

Divine Revelation: God reveals Himself to us through His Son, the Eternal Word of the Father. The name Word should indicate to us that all we can know of God is known through His Son. When we think of the Word, therefore, we should first think about a Divine Person rather than primarily His works and life written down in Sacred Scripture. The Son revealed Himself, through the power of the Holy Spirit, gradually over many millennia, through words and deeds among His people. God spoke through various ways (including visions and dreams) until the time He enters history in a most surprising way (see Hebrews 1:1-2 [this reference refers to the Letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament, chapter 1, verses 1 through 2]). The fullness of Revelation comes to man when the Word takes upon Himself, Flesh. God is now fully revealed in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the fullness of Divine Revelation because He is God's very Word Who speaks to us in our own words, Face to face. Therefore, public revelation ends with the death of those who saw and heard Jesus Christ; namely, it ends with the death of the last Apostle (see Galatians 1:9 and CCC 51-73 [CCC refers to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and the numbers refer to the CCC's paragraph numbers, in this case paragraphs 51 through 73]).

Oral Tradition & the Bible: Revelation was preserved almost exclusively through oral tradition for much of salvation history. Some of this oral tradition was subsequently written down and recorded in what has come to be called Sacred Scripture. In the Old Testament, this writing began with what they called the writings of Moses or "the Law" (the *Torah* means Law in Hebrew). Later revelation included what Jesus called "The Law and the Prophets." Today, those who continue to follow this first series of Covenants, the Jewish people, call their Sacred Scripture the *Tanakh* in Hebrew or in English, the Hebrew Bible (they do not generally call it the Old Testament because they do not accept the New Testament). Today's Hebrew Bible does not accept all of the books as Scripture which the Catholic Church accepts as divinely inspired Old Testament books (for more on this, see the section on the Deuterocanonical Books below). With the advent of Christianity, the revelation of the Old Testament is incorporated into the fullness of Divine Revelation which Jesus Christ brings to His People. Some of Jesus's words and work (and their interpretation) are written down by the Catholic Church and collected by the Church into what we call the New Testament. St. Paul makes it clear that not all "Tradition" has been written down (see 2 Thessalonians 2:15). Jesus, the fullness of Revelation, taught all things to His disciples and promised He would send the Holy Spirit Who would teach and bring all these things to recollection of the Church through the Holy Spirit (see John 14:26).

Inspiration and Inerrancy: Inspiration means that the Holy Spirit caused the sacred authors (the human authors), while using their natural human gifts and skills, to write down those things and *only* those things that He wanted them to write. This is what St. Paul meant when he said that the Scriptures are "God breathed" (see 2 Timothy 3:16). Because God is the first Author and God Who is Truth Himself, cannot deceive, there can be no error in Scripture if we understand that the purpose of Scripture is for God to reveal Himself to us for the sake of our salvation. In other words, there is absolutely no error in Scripture. If there are any assertions in Scripture that do not conform to history, science, etc. we can be assured the human author and the Divine Author were not asserting these things as facts but were using them as secondary elements in order to convey some other truth. For example, we might use the phrase "before the sun rose this morning" to indicate something we did before it got light. Technically, this could be declared to be a "scientific error" but we are not intending to describe the relative orbital mechanics between the earth and sun; rather we were using a common phrase to point to the time of an action that happened while it was still dark. It is not possible to assert that the Holy Spirit intended to convey error in order to teach some other truth. Scripture is inerrant because it is divinely inspired.

Transmission of Divine Revelation (CCC 74-79): Jesus said “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation.” (Mk. 16:15). He never commanded His apostles to go and “write” (in fact only five of the twelve wrote anything that has been preserved in Sacred Scripture). Preaching was the primary method of conveying the Gospel in the early Church. In fact, oral transmission of the faith was an absolute necessity for the first 1500 years of the Church for a number of reasons. First of all, not all the books of the New Testament were composed many years after the Holy Spirit gives birth to the Church at Pentecost. The first books were probably not written down until perhaps the fifth decade of the first century (about twenty years after Pentecost) and by some reckonings, all of the books were not complete until around A.D. 100. Therefore, there had to be an oral tradition until at least that time. Yet another reason oral tradition was still necessary even after all the books had been written is that there was no universally accepted canon of the New Testament until the Councils of Hippo in A.D. 393 and Carthage in A.D. 397 (the first canon of the Old Testament was confirmed at the Council of Rome in AD 382). Until that time, many books not now in the New Testament were considered Scripture by some (e.g. the *Letter of Clement* and the *Shepherd of Hermas*) and others books that are now accepted as forming the canon, were rejected by many (e.g. Hebrews and Revelation). It was the Magisterium of Catholic bishops who used the authoritative oral tradition passed from the Apostles to them to identify which books were written by Catholic authors and which professed the fullness of the Catholic faith without error. These Catholic bishops then accepted these books as forming the Christian canon of the Old and New Testaments. However, even after the initially setting of the canon of Scripture, the primary method of transmitting the faith still had to be oral. One of the reasons for this was that the printing press was not invented until the 15th century and therefore, a Bible had to be handwritten. It took about a year for a monk to copy the whole Bible and so its cost was approximately a year’s wage. Moreover, as the faith spread in the early Church and as Roman society collapsed, most of the Christian world’s population would be illiterate and couldn’t read the Bible anyway. From these historical facts, we can see that two things were a practical necessity which Providence provided for: first, there was the need for a visible, authoritative institution that could infallibly determine what was part of Divine Revelation and what was not and so to discern infallibly which books to include in the canon of Scripture. The second was that there needed to be a universal acceptance of that authority so that all Christians knew where to turn to find the truth. The Magisterium of the Catholic Church was recognized as this universal authority until the sad divisions in Christianity that began almost immediately after the turn of the first millennium.

Scripture, Apostolic Tradition, Magisterium: Scripture and Apostolic Tradition (oral Tradition) are the one source of God’s Revelation—The Word of God, in two distinct modes of Transmission. The task of authentically interpreting both of these has been entrusted to the living, teaching office (the Magisterium) of the Church alone. Its authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. Just like legs of a stool, all three must be kept in balance. The Magisterium serves Divine Revelation by identifying Scripture and Tradition, authoritatively interpreting them, and authoritatively applying this Revelation to the Christian life. Apostolic Tradition identifies and interprets Scripture and vice versa. If one of these legs is given undue precedence over the other two, all of Divine Revelation becomes unstable (CCC 80-100).

The Canon of Sacred Scripture: The term “canon” means a rule; for Sacred Scripture it refers to the formally accepted books that comprise Divine Revelation that has been written down. Sacred Scripture is a collection of books written by many human authors over many centuries, which the Church teaches to be inerrant. Scripture reveals the Mystery of God and His plan of Salvation for mankind (CCC 101-108).

Old Testament: 46 books (39 in the Protestant Bible), originally written in Hebrew, describing God’s love for His people and His forming of His family through the Covenant. It was God’s progressive revelation to His people as He prepared them for the fullness of revelation. While the Old Testament is inspired in the same way as the New Testament, it must be interpreted in light of the New Testament. The Old Testament is about Jesus Christ and must be interpreted in light of Him. It is generally seen as comprised of four divisions (CCC 121-123).

Torah (“Law” in Hebrew) or Pentateuch (“five containers” in Greek): *Torah* is the first five books of the Old Testament describing the formation of God’s Covenant people beginning with Adam and Eve, through the times of the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob who is renamed Israel), until the time of Moses’s death. The books of the *Torah* include Genesis (*Gen*), Exodus (*Ex*), Leviticus (*Lev*), Numbers (*Num*), and Deuteronomy (*Deut*).

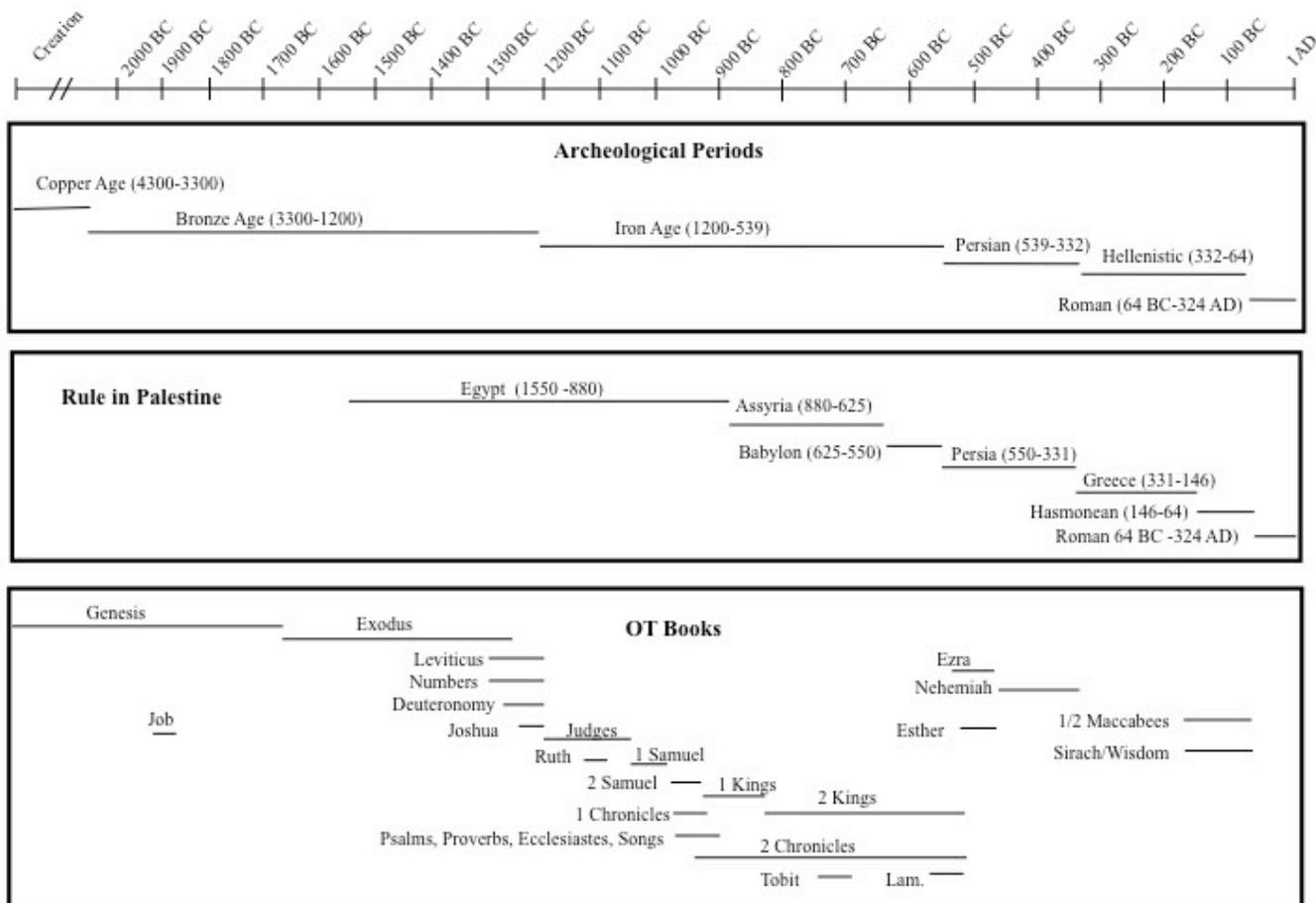
Historical Books: These books describe the history of the People of God from roughly 1250 B.C. through about 130 B.C. These books are not history in the sense we normally ascribe it. They include the ancient approach to history along with various other types of writings we find in other books of Scripture within the various historical books themselves. The historical books include Joshua (*Josh*), Judges (*Judg*), Ruth (*Ruth*), 1 Samuel (*1 Sam*), 2 Samuel (*2 Sam*), 1 Kings (*1 Kings*), 2 Kings (*2 Kings*), 1 Chronicles (*1 Chr*), 2 Chronicles (*2 Chr*), Ezra (*Ezra*), Nehemiah (*Neh*), Tobit (*Tob*), Judith (*Jdt*), Esther (*Esth*), 1 Maccabees (*1 Macc*), and 2 Maccabees (*2 Macc*).

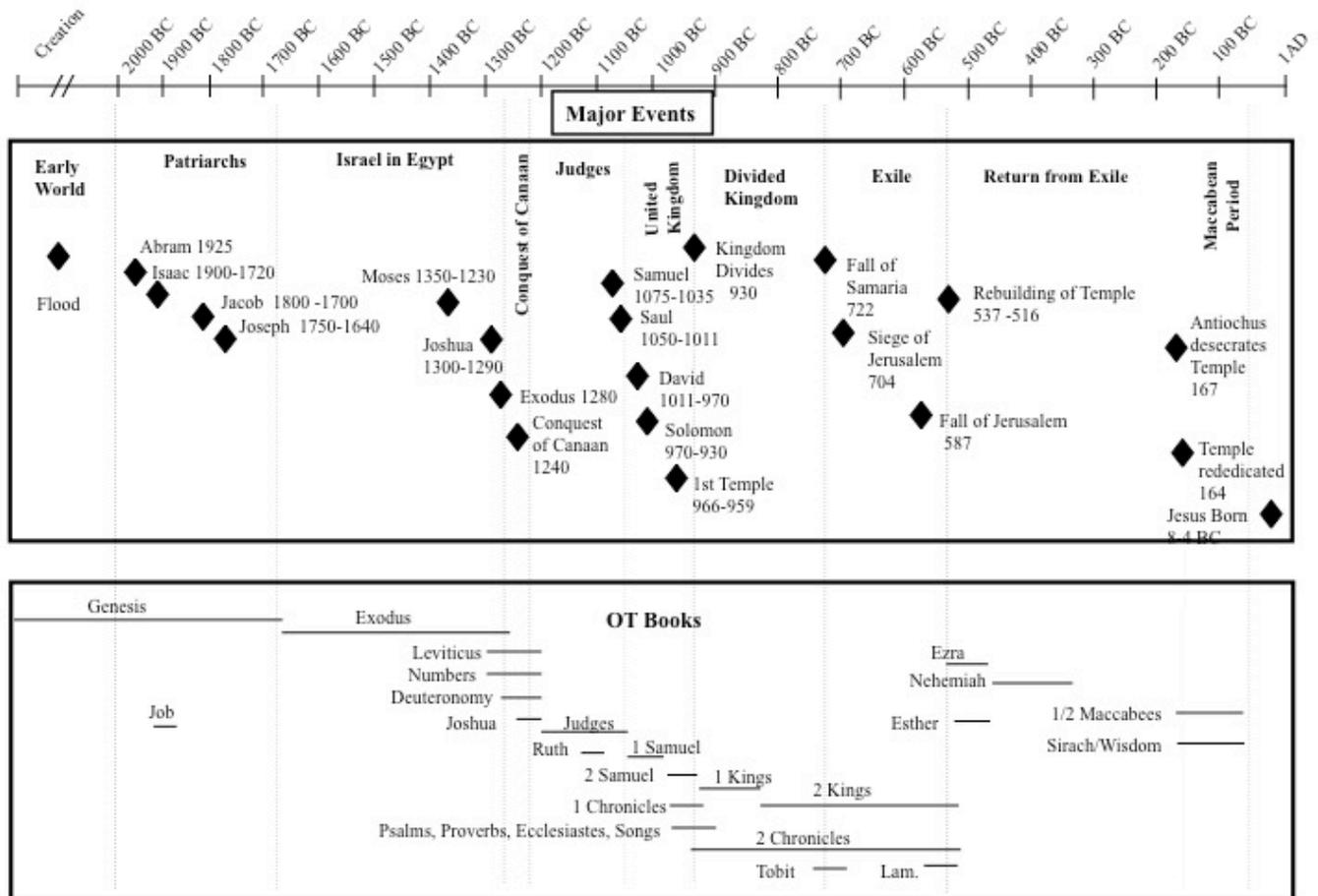
Wisdom Books: These books are comprised of literature of the type we call proverbs, poetry, prayer and other stories revealing God’s glory, the meaning of life (origin, destiny, suffering, good and evil, right and wrong) and how we are to live in light of God’s revelation. The wisdom books include Job (*Job*), Psalms (*Ps*), Proverbs (*Prov*), Ecclesiastes (*Eccl*), Song of Solomon (*Song*), Wisdom (*Wis*), and Sirach/Ecclesiasticus (*Sir*).

Prophetic Books: These books reflect God’s intervention in the affairs of His Covenant people to awaken them to their errors, warning of the consequences of evil behavior and the glory in obedience. The books include: Isaiah (*Isa*), Jeremiah (*Jer*), Lamentations (*Lam*), Baruch (*Bar*), Ezekiel (*Ezek*), Daniel (*Dan*), Hosea (*Hos*), Joel (*Joel*), Amos (*Am*), Obadiah (*Obad*), Jonah (*Jon*), Micah (*Mic*), Nahum (*Nahum*), Habakkuk (*Hab*), Zephaniah (*Zeph*), Haggai (*Hag*), Zechariah (*Zech*), and Malachi (*Mal*).

Deuterocanonical Books: The term “Deuterocanon” means the “second canon.” These are books of the Old Testament that the Catholic Church has recognized as part of the Old Testament since at least the 3rd century AD. Before Pentecost, when God’s authority to teach authoritatively passed from Jewish authority to the Catholic Church, there was never a formal definition of the books considered to be Sacred Scripture. Various canons were used in different parts of the Jewish world. In the first century AD, Christian apologists (those who defended the Christian faith against those who argued against it, namely Jews and Greeks alike) began using the Greek translation of Old Testament books to try to prove to their Jewish opponents, that Jesus was indeed, the promised Messiah (e.g. Isaiah 7:14). The Greek translations of these books in some cases made it difficult for the Jews to argue against the Christians points and so the Jewish Rabbis came together in what is now called the “Council of Jamnia” sometime in the second century AD to declare that they would accept as Scripture, only the books found in Hebrew and only the Hebrew version of those books. Seven books and parts of two others found in the Greek translation of the Old Testament could no longer be found in Hebrew and so were excluded from the Hebrew Bible. During the Protestant Reformation, Catholics also would use works from the Deuterocanon to argue against the Reformers (for example, praying for the dead found in 2 Maccabees 12:44). For this reason, beginning with Martin Luther, the Protestant Reformers began to accept the Jewish canon rather than the traditional Christian canon and so removed these Old Testament books from their Bibles. The books comprising the Deuterocanonical books include: Tobit, Judith, parts of the book of Esther, The Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, Baruch, parts of Daniel, and 1 & 2 Maccabees.

History of the Old Testament: below are two figures that roughly show major events from the Bible and from world history that help to contextual the time the events in each of the books of the Bible take place.





New Testament: 27 books, originally written in Greek from A.D. 50 to A.D. 100. It reveals the fullness of God's plan of Good News for all mankind. What was revealed in veiled language in the Old Testament is uncovered and shines forth in the New Testament. (CCC 124-131)

Gospels (Greek for "Good News"): The heart of Scripture because they are the principle source of the life and teachings of the Incarnate Word. They are held in great esteem for this reason, but they are not any more inspired, nor can they contradict any other portion of Scripture. There are four Gospels, three are referred to as the Synoptics because they, more or less, provide a synopsis of Jesus' life —Matthew (*Mt*), Mark (*Mk*) and Luke (*Lk*); the fourth is the Gospel of John. John's Gospel presupposes the reader is familiar with the other Gospels and so this book is written much more in terms of the theological meaning of Jesus's life and works than the Synoptics.

Acts of the Apostles (*Acts*): Essentially the history of the early Church from the Ascension until Paul's departure for Rome.

New Testament Letters: these can be seen as the pastoral application and the catechetical teaching of the Gospel. There are 21 letters in all; 17 are traditionally attributed to St. Paul Romans (*Rom*), 1 Corinthians (*1 Cor*), 2 Corinthians (*2 Cor*), Galatians (*Gal*), Ephesians (*Eph*), Philippians (*Phil*), Colossians (*Col*), 1 Thessalonians (*1 Thess*), 2 Thessalonians (*2 Thess*), 1 Timothy (*1 Tim*), 2 Timothy (*2 Tim*), Titus (*Titus*), Philemon (*Philem*), Hebrews (*Heb*). The 7 Catholic Letters are by other Apostles and Apostolic writers written to the Universal (Catholic) Church; they include: James (*Jas*), 1 Peter (*1 Pet*), 2 Peter (*2 Pet*), 1 John (*1 Jn*), 2 John (*2 Jn*), 3 John (*3 Jn*), Jude (*Jude*).

Book of Revelation (*Rev* [also called the Apocalypse]): This is a book primarily written in the prophetic literary style of the type called apocalyptic literature. It is God's revelation describing the suffering that will occur among Christians and the glory which awaits those who persevere to the end. Catholic scholars generally see the event primarily fulfilled in the first century (A.D. 70) but also pointing to the life of the Church throughout history, describing these events made present in the liturgy (particularly the Mass), and finally referring to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ at the end of time.

Interpretation of Divine Revelation. Even though the books of Scripture have the Holy Spirit as their primary Author, the human authors are also true authors. He used their skills, gifts, natural knowledge, modes of speech, culture, etc. to convey His meaning. Therefore, the Holy Spirit is not only the primary Author, He is also the ultimate interpreter of Scripture. As Author, He gives Scripture its unity and coherence. As Interpreter, He acts through the Catholic Church by means of the Magisterium. Therefore, the Magisterium (the pope and all of the bishops of the world in union with him) is the final interpreter on earth.

Literal sense: the first sense of Scripture is the literal meaning of the text; that is, the meaning intended by the human author. Understanding the literal meaning entails working to understand what the human author intended to convey to his readers. The Church teaches that authentic interpreters of Scripture must keep in mind there are many different types of writings. There is real historical information, but we must be cautious not to assume the same approach we take to writing history is the approach used in the ancient world. While there is some commonality, the ultimate purpose of history before the 17th century AD was to explain its meaning. Historical detail often took on a secondary importance if it was not directly part of the historical meaning being conveyed. There are prophetic works as well. Prophecy has its own style. It is not simply the prediction of the future, it is God speaking to His people through their own ways of speaking and thinking, in order to bring His message to them. Very often the prophets were sent when God's people, including their leaders, had gone astray and they needed more explicit direction in order to bring them back to Him. One special type of prophetic writing is called apocalyptic literature. Here the authors use language that is difficult for us to understand today. It is very often written to people who are beginning to experience some sort of oppression. While the language seems dark to us, it is often actually encouragement that God's plan will eventually triumph.

There are many other types of literature such as poetry, proverbs, parables, allegory, epistles, midrash (explanations of the meaning based upon oral tradition), etc. Because all of these require attention first to what the human author intended, we must be attentive to the meaning of the words in the original language, the entire context of the words in the verses, the context of the verses in the chapters, the chapters in the books, and the meaning of the books in the entire canon of the Bible. Each passage therefore, must be considered as part of the unity of the whole Bible.

Spiritual Senses: Because the Holy Spirit is the first Author of Scripture, He inspires the human authors to include meaning that goes beyond what they are aware of, but which is directly connected to what they are saying. This meaning is referred to as the spiritual sense of Scripture and there are three general types. There is the allegorical or the typological meaning. This identifies Jesus Christ acting in salvation history, throughout Scripture, especially in the Old Testament. This warrant comes from St. Paul who says that Adam was a type of Christ (Romans 5:14) and that the rock that followed Israel through the desert was Christ (1 Corinthians 10:4). Another spiritual sense is moral sense (also called the tropological sense). Scripture was not simply written to satisfy our curiosity; it was written for our instruction. The Gospel demands our response and Scripture helps to guide us in how we are to act. The final sense is the future or anagogical sense. All of the events of Scripture point to our end, to the end of time when all is brought together again under the Headship of Jesus Christ (CCC 109-119).

Some Suggested Resources:

This is an academic overview of Scripture from the 1911 Catholic Encyclopedia:

www.catholic.com/encyclopedia/scripture

This a series of articles from Catholic Answers that address a variety of topics related to the Bible:

www.catholic.com/tracts/scriptural-reference-guide-0

www.catholic.com/encyclopedia/canon-of-the-holy-scriptures

www.catholic.com/tracts/scripture-and-tradition

www.catholic.com/encyclopedia/types-in-scripture

www.catholic.com/magazine/articles/not-by-scripture-alone

www.catholic.com/encyclopedia/biblical-exegesis

This is an apologetic approach to understanding the Bible and the Catholic Church:

www.catholic.com/blog/tim-staples/born-again-the-bible-way

This is a very helpful book for understanding Scripture and a summary of each of the books of the Bible.

The author is a famous theologian and Catholic Convert, Scott Hahn:

http://www.amazon.com/Understanding-Scriptures-Parish-Scott-Hahn/dp/1936045869/ref=sr_1_7?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1421356804&sr=1-7&keywords=hahn+scripture

This is a very helpful book that helps the reader to gain an overview of the major events and figures of the Old Testament in the context of their meaning and purpose in light of their fulfillment in Jesus Christ:

http://www.amazon.com/Father-Who-Keeps-His-Promises/dp/0892838299/ref=sr_1_3?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1421356804&sr=1-3&keywords=hahn+scripture