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To: DIocese OF THE ARMENIAN CHURCH

ATTENTION OF ABP. KHAJAG BARSAMIAN

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MESSAGE FROM FR. VAHAN HOVHANESSIAN

NUMBER OF PAGES (INCLUDING THIS PAGE) (6) SIX

DATE JULY 21, 1993

TIME 10:05 a.m.

MESSAGE

PRIVATE

Your Eminence,

Asdvadz Oknagan.

Enclosed please find a copy of my "Introduction to the Holy Bible." This is not the final copy. I am still modifying it. However, I will be meeting with Fr. Garabed tomorrow at 10:00 a.m., to discuss the whole project. I thought if you have time we can meet tomorrow for a few minutes to discuss this article. Thank you.

Yours in Christ,

Fr. Vahan Hovhanessian

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INTRODUCTION TO THE HOLY BIBLE

Fr. Vahan Hovhannessian

Diocese of the Armenian Church in America

HOLY BIBLE is the title used by the Church to refer to a collection of books, letters and prophetic oracles that reveal God, His will and salvific plan to His people. The English word "Bible" comes from the Greek word *Biblia* the plural of *biblos* which means "papyrus bark" or "book." The word *Biblia* received its singular sense, i.e. "the Book," when the various books of the Holy Bible were put together and considered as a unity. Christians believe that these books were written, edited, compiled and preserved by Divine Inspiration and Guidance. The Bible is frequently referred to as the Word of God. This does not mean that God Himself wrote the books of the Bible nor that God dictated the Bible word for word to men who were merely His passive instruments. Some of those who witnessed God's revelation were inspired to write it down for generations to come. As one aspect of His Divine revelation, therefore, God inspired His people to produce Scriptures, i.e. writings which constitute the true genuine expressions of His truth will.

The written words of the Bible are human words, for indeed, all words are human. They are human words, however, which God Himself inspired to be written in order to remain as the written witness to Himself. The Bible has many different human authors. Some books of the Bible bear the names of persons to whom authorship is ascribed, others do not indicate in any way who wrote them. Nevertheless, Bible is truly the Word of God in human form because its origin is not in man but in God, who willed and inspired its creation. As human words, the words of the Bible contain all the marks of the men who wrote them, and of the time and the culture in which they were written. The writers of the books of the Bible conveyed the Divine message and revelation in the language and cultural symbols and images that they and their contemporaries understood. They were not taken out of their historical, cultural and ethnic milieu and thrown into a timeless and spaceless context. The knowledge of each generation is based on the understanding of its language, history and culture. The divine revelation, consequently, could not have been understood had it not been conveyed to the people through their linguistic, cultural and historical channels. Passages such as Joshua 19:12, Isaiah 38:8 and Matthew 24:29 are clear examples of the influence of the writer's contemporary cultural, scientific and historical context on his effort to convey the revelation he received. Some of the writers of the later books of the Bible, such as the books of the New Testament, used images and symbols even from earlier books of the Holy Bible. The author of the Revelation of John, for example, must have known, and most probably used, the book of Ezekiel (e.g. compare Revelation 4:6 with Ezekiel 1:5-6)

Armenians use several words to refer to the Bible. One of the most frequently used words is *Soorp Keerk*, "Holy Book." Bible is called the Holy Book because it contains revelations about the Holy One, God. It is Holy neither because it is a collection of books written by holy people such as the prophets, nor because it is used and kept in the Church. Bible becomes the Holy

Book for the faithful reader because by reading it the person receives God's eternal revelation. Another term Armenians use to refer to the Bible is *Asdvadzashunch*. It is the Armenian translation of the Greek θεοπνευστος which means "the breath of God" or "inspired by God". This word is not an invention of the Armenian fathers, it is used in the Bible itself. In II Timothy 3:16 we read, "all scripture is inspired by God." The Classical Armenian translation of the Greek for "inspired by God" is *Asdvadzashunch*. This title confirms the definition of the Bible as a collection of Books written not by God but under His inspiration and guidance.

The books of the Bible are classified into two major groups: Old Testament and New Testament. The term "testament" means 'treaty', 'contract', or 'covenant'. The Armenian word for this term is *Gudagaran* which has the exact meaning as the English. This word is used in the Bible to refer to the treaties that God established with His people. In the first two chapters of the first book of the Bible, Genesis, we read about the first treaty God made with man. God created Adam and Eve and gave them the authority over all the other beasts and creatures. He also commanded the man that he should not eat from the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil." Adam and Eve ignored God's commandment, and using their free will they disobeyed God. Consequently, they alienated themselves from God and from His plan for them to live an eternal life in the "garden of Eden." As we continue reading the following chapters of the book of Genesis and of the Bible we realize that human beings had always ignored God's commandments and violated the rules of their treaties with God, who, on the other hand, has always been merciful. Thus, whenever the people of God sinned and violated God's testament, He established a new testament with those who remained faithful to Him. Having said the above, we realize that the Bible contains a series of treaties or "testaments" between God and His people. Examples of these "testaments" are those between God and Noah (Genesis 9:1-17), Abraham (Genesis 17:1-27), Isaac (Genesis 26:1-5), Jacob (Genesis, 28:1-22) ... etc. With these "testaments" God also revealed His will and commandments to His people. The history of how the people of God received these commandments and lived by them and how God acted with them are recorded in the books of the Bible beginning with Genesis until the end of Malachi. These books also contain God's wrath about His people because they constantly forgot their responsibility in the treaty and ignored God's commandments. Through the mouth of His prophets, therefore, God announced to His people that the time will come when He will reject His people because they rejected Him, and He will invite all those who will believe in His new covenant to be heirs of His Kingdom (cf. Jeremiah 31:31-37).

When God in His infallible wisdom realized that the time has come to establish the last and eternal "testament" He sent His only Begotten Son, Jesus Christ, to establish the new covenant, which He would seal with His blood. The commandments and divine teachings of the new testament were revealed and taught by Jesus Christ during His earthly ministry. Our Lord, as far as we can tell, did not write down His teachings. The story and divine commandments of this new covenant were handed down by His apostles and eyewitnesses who preached the good news to the whole world. Some of these eyewitnesses wrote down what they were inspired to receive and

understand, others preached and had their disciples write them down.

After this general and brief introduction to the history of God's covenants with humanity we can clearly understand the division of the Christian Bible into two sections Old Testament and New Testament. The Old Testament includes the books recalling the history, revelations and prophecies concerning the old covenants of God with humanity. New Testament, on the other hand, includes the books, letters and prophetic oracles written concerning God's new covenant through His Son Jesus Christ.

The various books of the Bible were not written by a single writer nor at the same time. The people of God to whom God revealed Himself and who later on became the body and universal church of Christ, wrote, preserved and compiled these books. Consequently, the Bible with its two parts, was written, compiled and preserved in the Church, by the Church and for the Church. This process was done under God's inspiration as an essential part of the total reality of God's covenant relationship with His faithful people. The Holy Bible, therefore, comes alive and has the most profound divine meaning in the Church for the community which God has established, among whom He dwells, and to whom He has given Himself for communion and life everlasting.

In order to understand the Bible and be able to interpret it correctly one must study and be aware of the historical, cultural and mythical background of the writers of these books. It is also important to know to whom these documents were addressed and what the problem or condition of that specific community was at the time of the writing of the document. One should also understand why only certain books were accepted and compiled as Holy Scriptures and not other writings of the same period of time. Another important factor in understanding the message of the Bible is to read the specific verse or saying in the context of the whole chapter, book and even the whole Bible. It is not a correct hermeneutical method to pick up one verse, or few verses, out of the context of the chapter or of the book and explain it independently from its context. Because of all the above mentioned reasons, the Armenian church, as well as all the orthodox churches, does not allow any person to preach the Bible unless the person is taught the Scriptures in the holy and apostolic Christian tradition and is recognized by the church to be qualified for that mission. Misinterpretation was, and remains, one of the main factors which caused divisions in the universal Church, and which allowed heretical movements to grow and spread all around.

The Books of the Bible contain historical, geographical, scientific, cultural and various other kinds of informations. One should emphasize, however, that none of the books of the Bible were written with the intention of conveying ONLY historical, geographical, scientific, or cultural information. The purpose of these writings is to make God's revelation, which took place thousands of years ago, eternal and available for all generations to come until the end of time. The minute the reader starts focusing ONLY on the historical, geographical, cultural or scientific aspect of the book she (or he) loses the right track of receiving the Divine revelation through the pages of the Bible. It is exactly for this reason that the fathers of the Church always advise us in

their writings to prepare ourselves spiritually before opening the Bible and before trying to comprehend its Divine message. We are told to pray before reading the Bible so that God may enlighten our minds and make us, like the first witnesses, worthy of receiving His revelation. In liturgical services the congregation is prepared spiritually by hymns and prayers before the Gospel is chanted.

The books of the Old Testament can be generally classified into four groups:

1. Pentateuch, this term means 'five containers', referring to the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Together these books constitute the Law for which the Hebrew word *Torah* was used. The books of this group contain a survey of history from creation of the world to the death and burial of Moses and his succession by Joshua. It is in these books that God's commandments and laws were revealed to Israel on Sinai
2. Historical Books, this category includes: Joshua, Judges, Ruth, The First and Second Books of Samuel, The First and Second Books of Kings, The First and Second Books of Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Tobit, Judith, Esther, The First and Second Books of Maccabees. These books contain the history of the people of God. The relationship of Israel with God and with the other neighboring nations.
3. Books of Wisdom, this category includes: The Book of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, The Canticle of Canticles (song of Songs), Wisdom, Sirach (ecclesiasticus). These books examine and discuss certain topics related to our lives and salvation such as theological and experiential wisdom, justice, and nature. They reflect on a wide area of life in order to provide insights into the way things are and the way they should be.
4. Prophetic Books, this category includes: The Book of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Baruch, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. These books are called prophetic because they include oracles delivered and written by prophets to whom God revealed Himself and who prophesied about future events. The prophets of the Old Testament used various means of communication to convey their oracles such as dreams, visions, ecstatic experiences and various divinatory practices. These prophetic oracles, in general, are about Israel. Many of them, however, written hundreds of years before Jesus' birth, had prophesied about His birth, miracles, suffering, crucifixion and resurrection. These prophecies were fulfilled in Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

We may classify the books of the New Testament into four groups as well:

1. Gospels, this category includes: The Gospel According to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The term "Gospel" comes from the archaic "God-Spell." The Armenian word for Gospel is *Avedaran* which means "(the book containing) the good news." Gospels are the 'containers'

of the good news because in them are preserved the story of the birth, temptations, teachings, miracles, passion, crucifixion, death, and resurrection of Our Lord.

2. Acts of the Apostles: this category contains one book. Its main feature is the work of the Holy Spirit through the apostles in the early church. This book contains certain historical information which are not recorded in the gospels such as the Ascension of Our Lord, the Descent of the Holy Spirit (Pentecost) and the ordination of the early church's deacons, ministers and elders.
3. Epistles. this category includes: St. Paul's Letters to the Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Collossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, and to Philemon, the Epistle to Hebrews, The Epistle of James, The First and Second Epistle of Peter, The First, Second and Third Epistle of John and the Epistle of Jude. These are actual letters and epistles written by the apostles or their disciples. They discuss the faith, liturgical practices and moral responsibilities of the early Christians.
4. The Revelation of John. This book is also called the Apocalypse a term which comes from the Greek *αποκαλυψις* and means the disclosure of that which was previously hidden or unknown. The Greek word 'apocalypse' is used in the title verse of the book, "the 'apocalypse' of Jesus Christ ..." to express the idea that God is unveiling secrets about heaven and earth, past, present and future. This book combines letters and prophetic oracles using a very rich symbolic language. The main theme of the book is to prophecy about, and to prepare the faithful for, the coming day of Judgment.

Daily or regular reading of the Holy Bible is one of the important duties and spiritual nourishing practices of the true Christian. Our Lord and Savior Himself read and knew the Scriptures (cf. Luke 4:16). He expected His followers to know the Scriptures (cf. Matthew 12:3, 19:4, 12:16, 22:31, Mark 2:25, 12:10, Luke 6:3 ... etc.). Through many passages in the Bible God reminds us about the importance of reading the Bible (cf. John 20:31, Hebrews 4:12, 2 Timothy 3:14-15 ... etc.). Early Christians constantly read the Bible (cf. Acts 17:11, 1 Timothy 4:13 ... etc.). The fathers of the Church, Armenian and non-Armenian, always emphasized the importance of the daily Bible reading. This emphasis was translated into a daily recitation of the Bible in the Church services. One of the important didactic parts of the divine Liturgy is the recitation of the Bible which is followed by the sermon explaining and interpreting the assigned reading of the Scriptures for that day. A person ceases to be an active Christian and a true member of the Body of the Lord if he or she does not make an effort to systematically read and study the Bible.

As you open the pages of the Bible remember that Satan and the adversary will do his best to disrupt your spiritually enlightening journey. Pray, therefore, before you start reading the Bible that God may give you the wisdom and knowledge to read and understand His revelation through the pages of this Holy Book.

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