

Spring 2005

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Recommended Citation

Cook, Joan E. S.C., Ph.D. (2005) "Elizabeth Seton: Woman Steeped in Scripture," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 25 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol25/iss1/3>

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Elizabeth Seton: Woman Steeped in Scripture

BY

JOAN ELIZABETH COOK, S.C., PH.D.

I invite you to come with me on a treasure hunt.¹ The treasured goal is greater knowledge and appreciation for Elizabeth Seton's devotion to the Bible. The clues we will discover along our way are for the most part to be found in her writing, typical of all eighteenth and nineteenth century women, that is, journals and letters. In them we find five kinds of references to the Bible: first, her use of biblical language to express her own thoughts; second, her explicit references to the Bible itself or to a particular book, story, biblical person or commentary; third, the instructional materials and methods she used in the school at Emmitsburg; fourth, the markings she made in her Bibles; and fifth, her handwritten copies of biblical commentaries. Along with the clues found in Elizabeth's own writing we will also address documents written by other profoundly influential people in her life. On this treasure hunt we will use writings of the Reverend John Henry Hobart of Trinity Episcopal Church; and also of the Filicchi brothers, Filippo and Antonio, who introduced her to Catholicism.

We will make five stops on our treasure hunt as we look for clues in Elizabeth's life: her childhood in her Episcopalian New York City family; her Italian journey during which she cared for her husband William until his death, then experienced the first stirring of her interest in Catholicism; her year of struggle and discernment that culminated in her profession of the Roman Catholic faith; her years as director and teacher at the Emmitsburg, Maryland, school; and finally, a stop that does not fit neatly into a specific time period but permeates her whole life, her love for Psalm 23.

After we visit these five stops and examine the clues we find there, we will glean insights into Elizabeth's threefold devotion to the Bible as her friend, the object of her study, and her anchor.

Elizabeth's Growing-up Years

Our first stop is Elizabeth's youth. When she was a young girl her stepmother, Charlotte Barclay Bayley, taught Elizabeth the

¹ I am most grateful to Betty Ann McNeil, D.C., archivist, Saint Joseph Provincial House, Emmitsburg, MD, for recommending and locating many of the materials that contributed to this study.

Twenty-third Psalm, which remained her favorite psalm throughout her life. We will look carefully at her devotion to Psalm 23 later in our treasure hunt.

In addition, as an Episcopalian in pre-Revolutionary, Revolutionary, and Federalist New York, Elizabeth practiced what we today would call Low Church Episcopalianism. It emphasized the scriptural Word in religious belief and practice, without regard for the word in tradition, or for the prominence of rituals. After the Reverend Hobart was assigned to Trinity parish, where she and William worshiped, the services took on a High Church quality: several Sundays a year were Communion Sundays, when participants took communion in memory of the Last Supper, but not through belief in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. However, along with his tendency to High Church theology and ritual, Hobart always retained a strong evangelical Low Church approach to preaching.²

Elizabeth grew up with this Low Church belief in “Sola Scriptura,” that is Scripture alone as our source of revelation, a belief that is still prevalent in evangelical religions today. This belief implies frequent reading of and abiding love for the Scriptures as the only source of our knowledge of God and of the divine will in our lives. It does not give weight to what Catholics call tradition, that is, the ongoing discernment of the meaning of Scripture for our time. This foundational characteristic of Elizabeth’s belief is evident in a letter to Antonio Filicchi, written during her year of discernment leading to her profession of faith as a Catholic. She wrote to him, “The tradition of the Church has not the true weight of authority in my mind.”³ We will return to these words later, when we consider Elizabeth’s struggle to embrace Catholicism.

While the young Elizabeth was in school she copied important information, and reflections on subjects she was studying, into notebooks. A notebook dated 1791 contains Elizabeth’s writings on a wide range of subjects from ancient history to physics. Many of the notes were copied from other sources; some appear to be her own thoughts. At one point in the notebook we read the following in a discussion of the existence of good and evil.

² Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 625–26.

³ Elizabeth Seton to Antonio Filicchi, 19 September 1804, Regina Bechtle, S.C., and Judith Metz, S.C., eds., *Elizabeth Bayley Seton: Collected Writings*, Vol. One (New York: New City Press, 2000), 322.

Every thing has two views. Jacob & Job & Solomon gave one section of the globe, & this representation another's truth lieth betwixt – or rather, good & evil are mixed up together, which of the two preponderates is beyond our enquiry; – but, I trust it is the good: – First as it renders the Creator of the world more dear & venerable to me, & secondly because I will not suppose, that a work intended to exalt his glory, should stand in want of apologies.⁴

This text appears to be her own due to the first-person reference (“*more dear and venerable to me*”) and its reflective quality. Elizabeth grapples here with the thorny problem of the existence of evil in the world. Her method of inquiry provides clues about her knowledge and love for Scripture. First, she names three biblical figures who illustrate the presence of goodness. Jacob wrestled all night with the stranger, and refused to let him go until the man blessed him (Gen 32:24-30); Job remained faithful to God in spite of the loss of everything dear to him; and Solomon prayed for a listening heart to rule his people and discern good and evil (3:9). Thus, all three of them serve as witnesses to the presence of goodness in the world.

Then Elizabeth reasons that goodness is more prevalent in the world than evil. This time her inquiry begins with a look at the creation of the world. She first examines her own feelings for the Creator whom she perceives as more dear and venerable to her when one finds more good than evil in the world, an observation in keeping with the Genesis stories of creation. Then she reasons that creation glorifies the Creator. This being the case, evil cannot predominate within creation. In this notebook entry we see the second clue to Elizabeth's knowledge of the Bible: explicit references to biblical people and events. (At this point we might observe that Elizabeth almost never cites the specific book, chapter or verse to which she refers; consequently, the reader must recognize the references in order to see that Elizabeth is quoting or alluding to the Bible. Hence my calling this project a treasure hunt!)

⁴ “Eliza A. Bayley's School Book, 1791,” Archives Saint Joseph's Provincial House, 1-3-3-30, rare book #32, 122. Here and throughout, Elizabeth's spelling, punctuation and grammar are retained in quotations from her writings.

Several pages later in the same notebook, Elizabeth details the importance of generosity. She wrote:

Look into the world – how often do you behold a sordid witch whose strait heart is open to no mans affliction, taking shelter behind an appearance of piety, & putting on the garb of religion, which none but the merciful & compassionate ought to wear. Take notice with what sanctity he goes, to the end of his days, in the same selfish track in which he at first set out – turning neither to the right hand nor to the left – but plods on – pores all his lifelong upon the ground, as if afraid to look up, lest peradventure he should see ought which might turn him one moment out of that strait line where interest is carrying him. – or if by chance, he stumbles upon a hapless object of distress, which threatens such a disaster to him – like the Priest in the parable, he passes devoutly by on the other side as if unwilling to trust himself to the impressions of nature or hasard the inconveniences which pity might lead him to upon the occasion.⁵

Here, in an entry that might have been copied from another source, Elizabeth incorporates two scriptural references into her reflection. The first is found in her description of the person who never looks around, and in this way avoids involvement with someone who might need help. That person is described as “turning neither to the right hand nor to the left.” The phrase appears in 1 Samuel, when the Philistines return the ark of the covenant to the Israelites. The ark is placed on a cart pulled by two cows, who haul the cart directly to its destination. The biblical text reads, “The cows went straight in the direction of Beth Shemesh along one highway, lowing as they went; they turned neither to the right nor to the left.” (6:12)

The second biblical reference is to the parable of the Good Samaritan. The notebook entry compares that “sordid witch” to the priest in the parable of the Good Samaritan, “who was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.”

⁵ Ibid., 124.

(Luke 10:31) Again Elizabeth uses scriptural language to express her point.

These few examples show us that Elizabeth became familiar with the Bible in her early years. By the time she was seventeen years old (the notebook in which the above quotations are recorded is dated 1791) she referred to biblical figures and stories as old friends.

The Italian Journey

We proceed to the second stop along our way, the Italian journey. During this trip, which lasted eight months, Elizabeth kept a journal for Rebecca Seton, William's sister and Elizabeth's close confidante. As it turned out, Rebecca lived only one month after the widowed Elizabeth returned from Italy and gave her the journal. Elizabeth did not have much time for the hoped-for conversations on the contents of this journal with her dear sister-in-law and friend, but she left us the written legacy of her faithful ministrations to her dying husband and her eight-year-old daughter Anna Maria, her gratitude to the friends who sustained her during that ordeal, and her unswerving faithfulness to God throughout all the difficulties and losses she experienced during that period.

Many examples of the first two clues appear throughout the entries in this journal. I will quote only a few excerpts. On November 21, two days after reaching Italy and being quarantined in the Lazaretto, she wrote:

Awoke with the same rest and comfort with which I had laid down – gave my W. his warm milk and began to consider our situation tho' so unfavorable to his complaint as one of the steps in the dispensations of that Almighty will which could alone choose aright for us and therefore set Ann to work and myself to the dear Scriptures as usual.⁶

The full meaning of these lines becomes evident in Elizabeth's note on 3 January 1804, about a week after William's death, "The 27th December the first [day] night I have taken off my cloaths to sleep since the 4th of October – always watching."⁷

⁶ Elizabeth Seton, "Journal to Rebecca Seton," 19 November 1803. *Collected Writings*, 256.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 279.

Her 2 December entry reads, "Enjoyed the morn, and day break – read the commentary on 104th Psalm, and sung hymns in bed till 10."⁸ (The psalm to which she refers here is number 105 in our contemporary Bibles.) In this entry Elizabeth goes on to describe the family's efforts to ward off the penetrating cold in the Lazaretto, hence their staying in bed until mid-morning. On 4 December she wrote:

I sometimes feel that [Henry Hobart's] angel is near and undertake to converse with it – but these enjoyments only come when all is quiet and I have passed an hour or two with King David, the Prophet Isaiah, or become elevated by some of the commentaries –⁹

On 13 December Elizabeth penned, "No sufferings, nor weakness nor distress (and from these he is never free in any degree) can prevent [William's] *following* me daily in Prayer, portions of the Psalms, and generally large Portions of the Scriptures."¹⁰ Two days later she wrote:

Finished reading the Testament through, which we began the 6th October and my bible as far as Ezekiel which I have always read to myself in rotation, but the lessons appointed in the Prayer Book, to W. – to day read him several passages in Isaiah which he enjoyed so much that he was carried for awhile beyond his troubles – indeed our reading is an unfailing comfort. Wm says he feels like a person brought to the Light after many years of darkness when he heard the Scriptures as the law of God and therefore Sacred, but not discerning what part he had in them or feeling that they were the fountain of Eternal Life.¹¹

⁸ *Ibid.*, 265.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 250.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 269.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 271.

On Christmas Eve she recorded:

He said 'and how I wish we could have the Sacrament' – well we must do all we can and putting a little wine in a glass I said different portions of Psalms and Prayers which I had marked hoping for a happy moment and we took the cup of Thanksgiving setting aside the sorrow of time, in the views of the joys of Eternity.¹²

On the day before he died she recalled, "Every promise in the Scriptures I could remember and suitable Prayer I continually repeated to him which seemed to be his only relief."¹³

These are a few of Elizabeth's numerous references to Scripture in the Italian journal. They include references to specific books and people, biblical quotations, and references to biblical commentaries. They give us an insight into her reliance on Scripture to comfort her dying husband and strengthen him in his own belief, and to sustain her daughter Anna and herself during the agonizing weeks before William died.

After William's death the Filicchi family cared for Elizabeth during the remaining three and a half months of her stay in Italy. She frequently accompanied them to Church, and during this time experienced the first stirrings of interest in the Catholic religion. After several unavoidable delays, she and Anna set sail for America with Antonio as their escort. A few days before leaving Italy Elizabeth remembers that, when she wondered to Antonio if she would find her loved ones still alive at home, "He said in his dry English 'my little sister, God, the Almighty, is laughing at you as he takes care of little birds and makes the lily's grow, and you fear he will not take care of you – I tell you he will take care of you.'"¹⁴

While on board ship Elizabeth wrote on 19 April 1804:

The Lord is my refuge – my God is the strength of my confidence. If the Lord had not helped me, it had not failed but my soul had been put to silence; but when I

¹² Ibid., 273.

¹³ Ibid., 274.

¹⁴ Ibid., 298.

said my foot had slipped, thy mercy, O Lord, held me up. For four days past, the trial has been hard – oh, Lord, deal not with me in displeasure – let not my enemy triumph – have mercy on us, for Jesus Christ’s sake.¹⁵

We recognize the scriptural allusions and quotations, including combinations of several different passages, to express her confusion, sorrow, contrition, faith, and trust in God in the midst of her tumult of clashing emotions and earnest spirit. (See Psalms 38:16; 46:1; 94:18.)

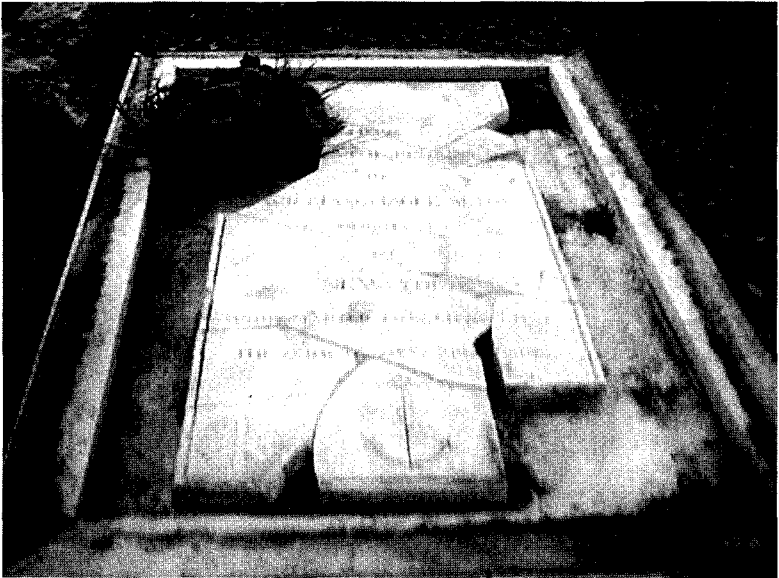
Elizabeth’s Struggle to Embrace Catholicism

We proceed now to the third stop in our hunt. After Elizabeth returned home to New York in June 1804, she wrestled for nine months with her conflicting loyalty to her own Episcopalian roots and the budding desire to embrace Catholicism. We have clues about the intellectual aspect of her struggle from two rival sources: a treatise on Catholic doctrine that had recently been completed by Filippo Filicchi entitled “Mr. Filicchi’s Exposition and Vindication of Catholic Doctrine,” and the Reverend Hobart’s failed effort to prevent Mrs. Seton’s conversion found in a seventy-five page letter written in response and refutation of Filicchi’s treatise.¹⁶

We will look at sections of these two documents, but first some words of introduction. Filicchi’s work treats all the fundamental beliefs of Catholicism according to the articles in the creed. It includes such topics as priesthood; the sacraments, especially Holy Eucharist; and Scripture, notably questions of biblical authority and interpretation, and the Church’s role in the interpretation of the Bible. Throughout the work Filicchi relies heavily on Scripture as the basis for his defense of Catholicism.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 300.

¹⁶ Charles I. White, *Life of Mrs. Eliza A. Seton, Foundress and First Superior of the Sisters or Daughters of Charity in the United States of America* (New York: Edward Dunigan and Brother, 1853), Appendix A, “Mr. [Filippo] Filicchi’s Exposition and Vindication of Catholic Doctrine,” 521-551; also “Henry Hobart’s vain efforts to prevent Mrs. Seton’s conversion,” Archives Saint Joseph’s Provincial House, 1-3-3-20 A.



The grave of Elizabeth's husband, William Magee Seton (1768-1803).
Courtesy, Archives of the Daughters of Charity, Emmitsburg, Maryland

At one point in the treatise Filicchi explains the necessity of belonging to the Church in order to attain salvation. This conviction clarifies why he is so insistent on the correctness of Catholic doctrine: he believed that people's salvation lay in the balance. Even though this treatise was not written expressly for Elizabeth, but had been recently completed at the time of the Setons' visit to Italy, it was certainly timely in its appearance because it addressed the fundamentals of Catholic belief, and relied strongly on Scripture to support its points. Surely it gave the treatise additional influence beyond that of the words themselves, coming as it did from a family friend.

It is clear that Elizabeth took Filicchi's treatise seriously, and studied it carefully in light of her own Episcopalian beliefs. She gave the document to her friend and mentor Henry Hobart, who responded in a seventy-five page letter to Elizabeth. His letter methodically addressed the points in Filicchi's treatise, refuting them in the light of Episcopalianism and, like Filicchi's treatise, basing his arguments on Scripture. The tone of his letter is strongly exhortational as he writes it specifically to Elizabeth, offering not only a compendium of beliefs but also a plea to his friend and advisee to remain faithful to Episcopalianism and to him personally.

Now, look at both documents, comparing their treatment of a few biblical topics. First, regarding the Church's authority to interpret Scripture, Filicchi writes:

The Protestants agree with the Roman Catholics in asserting that it is the duty of a Christian to believe every thing that is contained in the Old and in the New Testament, because it is the Word of God. They both acknowledge that faith is necessary to salvation. "He that believeth not is condemned already," says St. John. (3:18) "Without faith it is impossible to please him," adds St. Paul. (Heb 11:16)

If I am obliged to believe, I must know what deserves to be believed. Who will teach me this science? The Bible must be your school, they answer me. You will find therein every truth and nothing but the truth. Such an answer is just in a general sense, but I find that it is not enough to read the Bible; it is necessary to understand it well. I observe that the several denominations of Christians ground their belief on the Bible, but they still differ on the most essential points. The Protestant says that baptism is necessary for salvation, and the Quakers deny it.... There is no heresy that is not supported by its author as grounded in the Holy Scriptures. There is scarcely a sentence in the Gospel which has not been understood and interpreted by many in direct opposition to the sense given it by others. How ... should I trust my talents and my judgment, and have reliance on my opinions? I acknowledge I am unequal to the task, and that the Bible is insufficient for me if I am not shown the way to understand it rightly; I think that every man must be equally perplexed, and that no one can be firm in his faith without a guide, because no man can be sure of not being mistaken. Where shall I find this guide? Our Saviour has provided it for us. He knew too well that man, left to himself, would be liable to error and remain in darkness. He was not, therefore, satisfied to tell us we must believe, but he established

a Church from whom we might safely learn all that is to be believed without danger of erring.

I beg your particular attention to this point. It is most essential. We may say in a certain sense, that all the Law and the Prophets are contained therein....¹⁷

Filicchi asserts that the Church is given to us by God to be the interpreter of Scripture for us. He makes his point with logic, examples, and scriptural references, citing John's Gospel and Paul's letter to the Hebrews, and quoting Matt 22:40 in reference to the Bible as "the Law and the Prophets."

Hobart's response to Filicchi's point reads as follows:

Interpret the sacred volume only as I shall direct you – read it only as I shall permit you – It is dangerous for common use – it is not to be trusted to your own judgment however sincere, honest & upright it may be – Judge you whether a piety founded on such a basis would have been enlightened & satisfactory to your own mind. Judge you whether it would have been acceptable to that infinitely perfect Being who requires his worshipers to "worship him in spirit & in truth", with "the mind", as well as with "the soul & strength"; who requires you to be able "to give a reason for the hope that is in you."¹⁸

Hobart agrees with Filicchi that the individual is not properly qualified to interpret the Bible. He states this conviction, not only as a tenet of belief but also as an instruction by one who cares deeply about Elizabeth, and finds himself and his own convictions threatened by her interest in Catholicism and, no doubt, her interest in Filicchi.

Another topic Filicchi explains in his treatise is tradition, the ongoing effort of the Church to explain our beliefs and practices in light of Scripture and experience. He writes, "It belongs to the Church to ascertain which are the traditions that are to be received.... Without trusting to tradition, who would dare to work of a Saturday and keep

¹⁷ White, 524-25.

¹⁸ Hobart to Elizabeth Seton, 9-10.

the Sunday, no mention being made in the Scriptures of such alteration being allowed?"¹⁹

We see here that Filicchi supports his argument by alluding to the Jewish practice of observing the Sabbath on Saturday, the biblical seventh day. He asks how we justify working on Saturday, the traditional Sabbath day, when Scripture does not address the question of changing that day to Sunday. His response to this dilemma is "We therefore agree about the acceptance of the traditions approved by the Church's authority."²⁰

This was the point that caused Elizabeth to exclaim to Antonio, "The tradition of the Church has not the true weight of authority in my mind." In fact, the letter in which she wrote those words reveals the intensity of her striving to understand and accept the Catholic attention to tradition as a means of revelation, and her acknowledgment that she could not give herself to that belief at the time. She wrote on 19 September 1804:

Could you believe that the Prayers and Litanies addressed to our Blessed Lady were acceptable to God tho' not commanded in Scripture, etc., etc. by all which I find and you my Antonio will be out of Patience to find that the tradition of the Church has not the true weight of authority in my mind – do not be angry – pity me – remember the mixtures of truth and error which have been pressed upon my Soul – and rather pray for me than reproach me – for indeed I make every endeavor to think as you wish me to, and it is only the most obstinate resistance of my mind that prevents my immediately doing also as you wish me to, and all I can do is to renew my promise that I will pray incessantly and strive to wash out with tears and penance the Sins which I fear oppose my way to God – again I repeat pray for me –²¹

¹⁹ White, 531.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Elizabeth Seton to Antonio Filicchi, 19 September 1804. *Collected Writings*, 322.

This letter expresses Elizabeth's deep spiritual turmoil and confusion as she grappled with the differences between Catholic and Episcopalian beliefs. For her, all the prayers to be used were contained in the Scriptures. Non-biblical devotions were not part of her canon. But she was no longer at peace with her longstanding custom. She attributed her ambivalence on this matter to her own sinfulness as she pleaded with Antonio to pray for her. Her affection for and trust in Antonio is evident in the confession she makes to him.

In fact, it is small wonder that this discernment process was so tumultuous for her. In addition to specific theological points discussed in his seventy-five page letter, Hobart warned her:

And if it should then appear that you have forsaken the religion of your forefathers, the church in which God was worshiped in spirit and in truth {John 4:23} & embraced a communion in which innumerable errors & corruptions have defiled the simplicity of divine truth; & that you have done this not from the prejudice of education, not for want of better education, but in opposition to light & knowledge which few have enjoyed, my soul anxiously enquires, what answer will you make to your almighty Judge.²²

Hobart speaks here with the same conviction we saw in Filicchi's treatise, that outside the Church there is no salvation. But the two men differed as to which was the Church of salvation, the Catholic or the Episcopal, and Elizabeth found herself caught between these two beliefs and her two friends.

A further question for Elizabeth was that of transubstantiation. On 30 August 1804, after she received a letter from Bishop John Carroll in response to her inquiry about that doctrine, she wrote to Antonio:

The Bishop's letter has been held to my heart, on my knees beseeching God to enlighten me to see the truth, unmixed with doubts and hesitations – I read the promises given to St. Peter and the 6th chapter John every day and then ask God can I offend him by believing those express words – I read my dear

²² Hobart, 2-3.

St. Francis, and ask if it is possible that I shall dare to think differently from him or seek heaven any other way. I have read your Englands Reformation and find its evidence too conclusive to admit of any reply – God will not forsake me Antonio, I know that he will unite me to his flock, and altho’ now my Faith is unsettled I am assured that he will not disappoint my hope which is fixed on his own word that he will not despise the humble, contrite heart which would esteem all losses in this world as greatest gain if it can only be so happy as to please him –²³

In this letter she writes freely of the turmoil she suffered in her effort to do God’s will. The letter reveals her profound concern that she might offend God with her doubts about conversion. It also expresses her determined, faithful clinging to the word of God in Scripture, and expresses that perseverance in biblical language. She refers to scriptural passages and stories, telling Antonio that she reads two passages every day: the promises to Peter, “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt 16:18-19); and John 6, the story of feeding the five thousand, Jesus’s teaching about bread from heaven, and Peter’s statement of faith, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.” She reveals the depth of her searching, the pain of her uncertainty and the fear of offending her God when she writes, “can I offend him by believing those express words....”

Then, in the spirit of biblical lament, she follows the description of her situation with words of profound trust that God is with her, using biblical words to give voice to her conviction. She relies on Rom 5:5 (“And hope does not disappoint us”); Ps 51:17 (“a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise”); and Phil 3:8 (“But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ”).

²³ Elizabeth Seton to Antonio Filicchi, 30 August 1804. *Collected Writings*, 317-18.

Antonio's support during that turbulent year offered her an emotional and spiritual anchor that, in the end, enabled her to embrace the Catholic faith in the peaceful confidence that she had made the right decision. She wrote to him on 9 April 1805, several weeks after her profession of faith and First Communion:

My grateful Soul acknowledges that its dear Master has given me as I think the most perfect happiness it can enjoy on Earth and more and more it feels its joy and glory in the exchange it has made – dear dear Antonio May God bless you, bless you, bless you for the part you have done in it.²⁴

These few examples show us that scripture play an important part in her discernment leading up to her profession of the Catholic faith. The writings of her friends Filippo Filicchi and Henry Hobart discussed the significance of belief regarding Scripture, its authority, and the Church's authority to interpret it. They supported their beliefs with scriptural references and quotations. Their writings offered Elizabeth the opportunity to weigh different claims from the perspective of her own knowledge and love of the Bible, and her conviction about its authority in her life. Through the Bible, and the Church's teaching about it, she came to recognize and embrace the gift of Catholic faith. In addition, Antonio's support allowed her to voice her doubts and confusion, and in the end to open herself to embrace Catholicism.

Elizabeth's Years as School Director and Teacher

The fourth stop on our treasure hunt is the time Elizabeth spent as director and teacher in the Emmitsburg School. Two types of clues give us information about her devotion to the Bible during this time.

First, Elizabeth used Scripture-based methods and materials in teaching the students at Emmitsburg, an unusual approach for catechists of her time.²⁵ We find clues to her use of these materials in the Emmitsburg school's financial records which indicate the purchase

²⁴ Elizabeth Seton to Antonio Filicchi, 9 April 1805. *Ibid.*, 350.

²⁵ Carol Dorr Clement, "Elizabeth Ann Seton's Methods and Sources of Catechesis" (Unpublished Paper, Catholic University of America, 1985), 42. The Clement papers are in the Archives of Saint Joseph's Provincial House, 1-3-4-5.

of several different catechisms for religious instruction of the students. Most of the catechisms were organized in question-and-answer format to teach basic Catholic doctrine. One of these, a catechism prepared by Bishop John Carroll, was the forerunner of the well-known Baltimore Catechism. References to Scripture were sparse, and were used as proof texts to support doctrinal points.

But in addition to these, Elizabeth also purchased copies of a catechism entitled *Fleury's Short Historical Catechism Containing a Summary of The Sacred History and Christian Doctrine*, written by Claude Fleury, a French priest, catechist and church historian.²⁶ This catechism differs from the others by including summaries as well as questions and answers. It has two parts, of which the first contains a summary of sacred history and the second a summary of Christian doctrine. The first part narrates biblical stories of saving events, followed by questions and answers based on each story. In his introduction to the catechism, Fleury stressed the importance of the scriptural roots of doctrine as well as the value of biblical stories and imagery for catechesis.²⁷ Bishop John Cheverus approved a translation of this catechism in 1810, and introduced it into his Boston diocese in 1813. It is possible that he recommended it to Elizabeth for use in the school at Emmitsburg.²⁸

Records of Instructions in Preparation for First Communion demonstrate Elizabeth's reliance on Scripture in this task so dear to her that she continued to do it herself, even after her administrative responsibilities and declining health required her to delegate most of the teaching assignments to other Sisters.

The curriculum in general use for First Communion preparation consisted of a series of lessons to begin on Septuagesima Sunday, the first Sunday of the penitential season leading up to Lent. The course of study continued throughout Lent with an eye to Easter Sunday reception of First Communion after earlier reception

²⁶ Claude Fleury, *Fleury's Short Historical Catechism Containing a Summary of The Sacred History and Christian Doctrine* (Boston: J. Beicher, 1813). An earlier edition provides additional information: *Fleury's Short Historical Catechism Containing a Summary of the Sacred History and Christian Doctrine*, translated from the French, revised by the Right Rev. Bishop Cheverus (Baltimore: Fielding Lucas Jun'r, 1810). Fleury lived from 1640 to 1723.

²⁷ Mary Charles Bryce, "Evolution of Catechesis from the Catholic Reformation to the Present," *A Faithful Church*, John Westerhoff and O.C. Edwards, eds. (Wilton, Conn.: Morehouse-Barlow Co., 1981), 420-35.

²⁸ Clement, "Catechesis," 23, 26-27.

of the sacrament of Penance. Elizabeth's instructions follow that curriculum, which includes the topics of contrition, mortal and venial sin, and conversion. In her conference on contrition she refers to Joel 2:12-13 and Deut 4:29. These passages are: "Yet even now," says the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments" (Joel 2:12-13); and "But from there you will seek the LORD your God, and you will find him, if you search after him with all your heart and with all your soul" (Deut 4:29). These same references are used in the Roman catechism, a copy of which, in French with the Reverend Simon Bruté's autograph, is in the Archives of Saint Joseph Provincial House in Emmitsburg.²⁹ Elizabeth may well have used that catechism and may well have discussed the lessons with her dear friend Bruté as well.³⁰

The other clues from this period in her life, in fact from the year 1805, the year when she embraced Catholicism, until her death in 1821, are the markings she made in the two Bibles that she used. The first was a gift from Antonio Filicchi shortly after her conversion, and she used it from 1805 until 1813; she used the second from 1813 until 1821. The first was donated by Elizabeth's grandson, Monsignor Robert Seton, to Notre Dame University, South Bend, Indiana, where it is currently housed in the Rare Book collection.³¹ A note written inside by Robert reads, "This Bible belonged to my grandmother, Mother Seton, and after to her daughter Sister Catherine of the Convent of Mercy in Houston Street, New York. I had it newly bound in 1876."³² The second Bible is housed today in Vincennes, Indiana, with other books from Bruté's personal library. Bruté noted in it, "This Bible was in the hands of Mother Seton at her death, 4th January 1821, and had been so since 1813."³³ Elizabeth and Bruté exchanged Bibles in order to share reflections on favorite passages they had marked.

All the markings in both Bibles have been collected and published by Ellin Kelly in a very readable and useful book, *Elizabeth*

²⁹ The official title of the Roman Catechism is *Le Catéchisme du Concile de Trent*, third edition (Paris: Guillaume Desprez et André Pralard, 1686).

³⁰ Clement, "Catechesis."

³¹ Both Bibles are copies of the same edition of the Douay-Rheims version: *The Holy Bible*, First American Edition (Philadelphia: Mathew Carey, 1805).

³² Ellin M. Kelly, Ph.D., *Elizabeth Seton's Two Bibles: Her Notes and Markings* (Huntington, Ind.: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 1977), 20.

³³ Kelly, 22.

Seton's *Two Bibles*.³⁴ The information contained in her book is easily accessible, so I will not comment on it here. In terms of the insight it provides into Elizabeth's devotion to Scripture, the markings often focus upon words related to three of Elizabeth's favorite themes: eternity, priesthood and Eucharist, and to God's ongoing care for us.

Elizabeth's Love for Psalm 23

Finally, the fifth stop on our treasure hunt is Psalm 23, which Elizabeth learned from her stepmother. Throughout her life she considered it her favorite psalm. This psalm gives us an opportunity to examine two clues to Elizabeth's devotion to Scripture: her marks in her Bibles and her handwritten copies of biblical commentaries. In the Vincennes Bible, which she used from 1813 to 1821, she underlined parts of three verses. These are: "He hath set me in a place of pasture" (v. 2); " ... and my chalice which inebriateth me, how goodly is it!" (v. 5); and " ... that I may dwell in the house of the Lord unto length of days" (v. 6).³⁵ These three underlinings highlight her gratitude for God's constant care and her interest in eternity.

Now we turn to another kind of reference to the Bible evident in Elizabeth's writings, her handwritten copies of biblical commentaries, contained in several notebooks. Two of these shed light on Elizabeth's devotion to Psalm 23: her "Extracts from A Commentary on the Book of Psalms," which quotes excerpts of George Horne's *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*; and "Elizabeth Seton's Second Notebook," which contains quotations from George Henry Glasse's three-volume *Contemplations on the Sacred History altered from the works of Bishop Hall*, and reflections and sermons on different scriptural passages from an

³⁴ Kelly, *Two Bibles*. The book is available from the *Vincentian Heritage Department Bookstore* at a cost of \$3.95. Call 773-325-4943 or visit the online bookstore at www.depaul.edu/~vstudies if you would like to order your own copy.

³⁵ Kelly, 168.

Psalm 23^d

In this Psalm, the 'Sheep of God's pasture' address themselves to their great and good Shepherd declaring, 'their acquiescence and confidence in him: his diligence in feeding them with the food of eternal life; his watchful care in bringing them back from the ways of error, and conducting them in the path of truth: his power in saving them from death; his loving kindness in vouchsafing his spiritual comforts, during their pilgrimage in an enemies country: and they express their hope and trust, that a continuation of that loving kindness will enable them to pass, through the vanities and vexations of time, to the blissful glories of Eternity.

- The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want! -

In these words, which one cannot utter, without feeling the happiness they were intended to describe, the believer is taught to express his absolute acquiescence and complacency in the guardian care of the great pastor of the universe, the Redeemer and preserver of men. With joy he reflects that he has a Shepherd and that that Shepherd is Jehovah. where shall we ever find such unexampled diligence, such inexhaustible tenderness, such exquisite skill, such all-subduing might, and such unwearied patience? why should they fear who

Elizabeth's handwritten notes on Psalm 23.

Courtesy, Archives of the Daughters of Charity, Emmitsburg, Maryland

unidentified source.³⁶

Elizabeth had access to these materials through Bruté's library, an extensive collection of about five thousand volumes, including several biblical commentaries. We know that he made his books available to her as after her death he made a list of the books she had borrowed from him. The list includes a copy of George Horne's *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* that had originally been given to Elizabeth by Henry Hobart on 17 June 1802.³⁷

A look at Elizabeth's notes on Psalm 23 in the two notebooks provides an idea of their contents. From Horne she copied the introduction to the psalm, followed by comments on each of its six verses. Her notes to the introduction read:

In this Psalm, the 'Sheep of God's Pasture' address themselves to their great and good Shepherd declaring their acquiescence and confidence in him: – his diligence in feeding them with the food of eternal life; – his watchful care in bringing them back from the ways of error, and conducting them in the path of truth; – his power in saving them from death; – his loving kindness in vouchsafing his Spiritual comforts during their pilgrimage in an enemies country; – and they express their hope and trust that a continuation of that loving kindness will enable them to pass, through the vanities and vexations of time, to the blissful glories of Eternity.³⁸

The remarks on each verse highlight the theme of death. For

³⁶ Elizabeth Seton, "Extracts from *A Commentary on the Book of Psalms*," Archives Saint Joseph's Provincial House, 1-3-3-22B; "Elizabeth Seton's Second Notebook," Archives Mount Saint Vincent, N/P 110:M, II R2; George [Horne], Lord Bishop of Norwich, Oxford, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Philadelphia: William Young, 1792); George Henry Glasse (1761-1809), *Contemplations of the Sacred History*, altered from the words of the Right Rev. Father in God, Joseph Hall, D.D., sometime Lord bishop of Norwich, an abridgement of Hall's *Contemplations on the Historical Passages of the Old and New Testaments*. The copy of Glasse used by Elizabeth was probably the edition published in Gloucester, England, 1793; it may have belonged to Henry Hobart. Her extracts have been compared to the first American edition of Glasse (Philadelphia: Whitehall, 1807); the 1793 edition is not available.

³⁷ *Mother Seton: Notes by Rev. Simon Gabriel Bruté*, Sister Loyola Law, D.C., ed. (Emmitsburg, MD: Saint Joseph's Provincial House, 1884), 54-56.

³⁸ Seton, "Extracts," 89.

example, the commentary on verse 6 reads:

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever....

Experience of "Goodness and Mercy" already so often vouchsafed begets an assurance of their being continued to the end; for nothing can separate us from the love of Christ, if we do not separate ourselves from it. Thus will the Lord our Saviour provide for us on Earth, and conduct us to Heaven, where we will dwell for "length of days," even the days of eternity "one fold under one Shepherd," a fold into which no enemy enters, and from which no friend departs: where we shall rest from all our labours, and see a period to all our Sorrows; where the voice of praise and thanksgiving is heard continually; where all the faithful from Adam to his last born son, shall meet together, to behold the face of Jesus, and to be blessed with the vision of the Almighty; where "we shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more, neither shall the [Shall or Hall?] light on us nor any heat. But the Lamb, which is in the midst of the throne shall feed us, and lead us to living fountains of Water."³⁹

The commentary in the "Second Notebook" is more extensive. Its reflections on verse 6 conclude:

Sinners what will be your destiny? After having displayed the glories of God's mercy, must I unfold to you the awful Abyss of his Justice? Rather let me supplicate thy mercy, O Thou great shepherd of Souls! Holy Jesus! for the sheep who have strayed from thy fold – let not those perish for whom Thou has shed Thy precious blood – They will not come to Thee – seek them, O Thou compassionate Redeemer and

³⁹ Ibid., 92.

awaken them to Penitence by the resistless beams of thy love, and so fetch them Home to thy flock that we-may-be-all-one-fold, under one Shepherd – Jehovah our God.⁴⁰

These brief excerpts from the two commentaries illustrate their overall strong devotional tone. For Horne, the psalm highlights eternal life in Heaven, the place of reward for all people from Adam onward. The remaining commentary focuses on the psalm as a plea to God for mercy for all sinners. Today we would call these reflections rather than commentaries, realizing that they were written a good half-century before modern biblical scholarship began with the introduction of the historical-critical method.

Conclusion

Now that we have examined several clues from several different periods in Elizabeth's life we glimpse our sought-after treasure: Elizabeth's devotion to the Bible. We find that it has three aspects: the Bible was her friend, the object of her study, and her anchor. These three dimensions are clear from the clues we have examined.

First, the Bible was truly Elizabeth's friend. It was her constant companion, even at her death. She took comfort in holding it and in looking at it. She knew it intimately, and saw biblical people and stories as her close companions. Its words gave expression to her own thoughts, feelings and concerns. At times it comforted her and at others it discomfited her, but always it influenced her.

Second, the Bible was the constant object of her study. Elizabeth pored over its words, using the approach of her time, which was to identify literal and figurative meanings of passages. In her study she copied commentaries on which she relied on in preparing instructions and meditations. She knew the Bible better than many Catholics of her day as a result of her Episcopalian "sola Scriptura" background.

Third, the Bible was her anchor. It was a sacrament for her; holding it, looking at it and reading it gave her strength and peace. It was the basis for her prayer, which often consisted of reading and reflecting on the psalms and other biblical prayers. It was the means by which she listened to God speak to her in her struggles and in her

⁴⁰ "Elizabeth Seton's Second Notebook," 14.



The White House, St. Joseph's Valley. Mother Seton's home from 1810 until her death in 1821.

Courtesy, Archives of the Daughters of Charity, Emmitsburg, Maryland

joys. She knew the divine presence in her life through its pages, its stories and its people. She was truly steeped in the Scriptures.

I conclude with three questions for those of us who follow in Elizabeth's footsteps. First, which biblical people or stories are your friends and how do they give life to you? Second, what steps might you take to deepen your own knowledge and appreciation of the Scriptures? Third, and finally, how do you pray biblically?