

CHAPTER FIVE

Interpreting and Understanding the Texts

This is not the place to examine the history of the ways in which the Scriptures have been interpreted by Christian commentators in the early, medieval and pre-modern Church, but a short examination of the approach of Saint Paul in the Newer Testament and the approach of the first great Christian exegete, Origen (185-254), may help define what is different in the way modern scholarship approaches the sacred text.

The Older Testament is the fruit of centuries of reflection by people who cherished their traditions. Since they believed that it was God himself who was communicating with his people through the events of their history, the authors readily prefaced their inspired insights with expressions such as ‘YHWH said’ – a way of stating that the words that followed expressed God’s will as best they were able to discern it. They expected that God’s will would be beyond their ability to comprehend fully, and so they approached the inspired texts expecting that there would be many hidden meanings to be discovered there. The texts expressed inspired insights into the presence and action of a living God in their history. No text could hold it all, and so the history of the development of the Older Testament is a history of prayerful debate, discussion and refinement, always in the light of historical experience.

Paul

This continued into the Newer Testament. Jesus’ disciples reflected on the sacred texts in the light of the new revelation that they experienced in Jesus of Nazareth. They came to what they believed was a deeper understanding of God’s intention in inspiring the scriptures – an understanding that was hidden prior to God’s revelation in Jesus. When Paul, for example, comes to quote from the scriptures, that is, from the Older Testament, he does so with joy and with profound respect and gratitude for the word of God expressed there. But he reads with eyes enlightened by the love of the one whom he describes as ‘loving me and giving himself for me’ (Galatians 2:20). He came to see that the love of God revealed in the heart of Jesus embraces every person, for it is the love of God. Furthermore, he recognised this as the mission confided by God to Abraham and to Israel and he did his best to carry out that mission as a faithful Jew. He carried on the tradition of the inspired authors who went before him in recognising the limits of earlier insights and earlier expressions, limits that were brought to light by the presence and action of God in history.

However, Paul’s method of interpreting sacred texts is different from the way modern scholarship approaches them. We attempt to understand the meaning intended by the human author and understood by those for whom the text was written. To do this we try to grasp the historical context within which the author was writing, and the kind of questions he was attempting to address. Paul’s contemporaries lacked the instruments to do this, and it was not their focus.

A good example of Paul's method of interpreting the texts of the Older Testament is in Galatians 3:6-14. Paul has just returned from a mission in Galatia, and a successful one, for some Jews embraced Jesus as their Messiah, and some non-Jews joined them without first being asked to be circumcised. Paul had said that physical circumcision was not necessary. When certain members of the Christian movement from Jerusalem heard of this they went around the churches of Galatia demanding that Christian non-Jews not only be circumcised but also commit to following the Jewish Torah. As they understood it, the Torah expressed God's will and none of it could be set aside. Naturally, the Galatian Christians were confused. Paul heard what was happening and his response is his Letter to the Galatians. This is not the place to outline Paul's response in its entirety, but his method of arguing in 3:6-14 gives us a good illustration of the way Paul uses scripture in argument. It was a method understood by those against whom he is writing and considered normal in Jewish circles at the time.

He begins by quoting from Genesis two texts, one of which states that 'those who believe are the descendants of Abraham' (Genesis 15:6), and the other which declares that 'all the nations will be blessed in Abraham' (Genesis 12:3). So far he could expect agreement from his opponents. They, however, would argue that the only way the Gentiles can enjoy the blessing given to Abraham is to embrace the Jewish Law. Paul goes on to cite four texts, the first from Deuteronomy, the second from Habakkuk, the third from Leviticus and the fourth from Deuteronomy. He quotes them, not because the authors of the texts would agree with Paul's conclusion (that non-Jews can become part of the community through faith, without having to obey the Jewish law) – nothing could have been further from the minds of the authors. Rather, he quotes these texts because they are linked by the repetition of various words: faith, law, blessing, curse, life, Gentiles. We would not find this especially significant. Paul and his contemporaries, however, were taught to look at such connections as one way of discovering hidden meanings intended, not by the human author, but by God.

The gist of Paul's argument is that the Law, while indicating God's will, does not have in itself the power to enable us to do that will. Moreover, God has revealed in Jesus his will to transcend the Law in order to reach out in love to every human being. This is what Jesus did, even though it cost him his life. What God wants of us is not that we embrace a special culture (the Jewish one) to be saved, but that, with the power of Jesus' Spirit, we do what Jesus did: give our lives in love for each other because we believe (we know-in-faith) that this is God's will and that God is making it possible through the gift of his Spirit. Paul supports his position with quotes from the sacred texts. However, he shows no interest in what was intended by the authors of the various texts that he quotes. His insights came, not from the texts, but from Jesus. He then reflects back on the texts and breaks them open to discover the insights hidden there. Paul insists that 'the letter kills. It is the Spirit that gives life' (2Corinthians 3:6). The Law has value, but only when it is read 'spiritually' (Romans 7:14): that is, enlightened by the Spirit of God that is in Jesus.

The approach of modern scholarship is different. We are committed to using whatever tools are available to us in an attempt to discover the meaning the texts had for their inspired authors and for those who cherished the texts and handed them on. Such an attempt takes nothing from what Paul and his approach has to offer. It may add to it, by discovering the limited but truthful insights of the inspired authors.

Origen

Origen saw himself as developing the methods used by Paul, and, though others disagreed with his methods, his influence on subsequent Christian interpretation was immense. While he was in charge of the Catechetical School in Alexandria, Origen wrote his *Peri Archon* ('On Principles'), detailing principles of interpretation of scripture. Later, after his move to Caesarea, he wrote a commentary on Genesis (239-243AD). In his commentary on the scene in which Abraham attempts to pass Sarah off to Abimelech as his sister (Genesis 20), Origen writes (quoting 2Corinthians 3):

If there is anyone who tries to turn to the Lord, he ought to pray that 'the veil might be removed' from his heart – 'for the Lord is the Spirit'. He ought to pray that the Lord might remove the veil of the letter and uncover the light of the Spirit, that we might be able to say that 'beholding the glory of the Lord with open face we are transformed into the same image from glory to glory, as by the Spirit of the Lord.

Origen often quotes Paul: that what is written is written 'for us' (1Corinthians 10:6,11); that 'the letter kills, it is the Spirit that gives life' (2Corinthians 3:6); that the Law has value but only when it is read 'spiritually' (Romans 7:14). He refers, too, to the following from the Letter to the Hebrews: 'the law has only a shadow of the good things to come, and not the true form of these realities' (Hebrews 10:1). All scripture, in Origen's view, has a spiritual (and often an 'allegorical') sense. The literal sense is to be followed, but not when the literal meaning is 'illogical', 'impossible' or 'unworthy of God'. In such cases, the literal meaning of the words (what, following Paul, he calls the 'letter') was not the meaning intended by God. It was put there by God to alert us to the need to look more deeply for a 'spiritual' meaning.

In obedience to the Saviour's precept that says: 'Search the Scriptures', one must carefully investigate how far the literal meaning is true, how far it is impossible, and to the utmost of one's power one must trace out from the use of similar expressions the meaning scattered everywhere through the scriptures of that which, when taken literally, is impossible.

– On Principles, Book 4, 19-20

When Origen uses the word 'illogical' he means it in its most profound sense: 'without the Logos', 'without the Word-made-flesh'. This attempt by Origen to read all the scripture in the light of Jesus has its value, and it influenced interpretation right down to our own day. It has, however, two limitations. Firstly, it does not attempt to discover the meaning the Scriptures had in their own historical setting. Origen's focus was on Jesus and therefore on what he saw as the fullness of revelation. He was not concerned with the human imperfections of God's inspired instruments.

Secondly, since he lacked appropriate criteria to check the allegorical meanings that he found in the texts, there was the obvious danger of reading into the inspired word meanings that had no connection with their intended meaning.

For all the beauty of their reflections, this lack of clarity recurs regularly in the writings of the Fathers of the Church, of the medieval scholastics, and of pre-modern theological manuals. Their methods of interpretation carry with them the danger of using scriptural texts to support positions (however valid), instead of being open to the surprise of God's inspired word.

Modern Scholarship

Modern scholarship shares the attempt of earlier times to reflect on the sacred texts in order to remember the past and to discern in the present the presence and action of God. It is also committed to attempt something that was not possible in earlier times; namely, to discover the meaning the texts had for those who were inspired to write them. The tools to attempt this were not previously available. It is not always an easy task to know when texts were composed, what words and phrases meant in their original context, and what kinds of questions ancient writers were addressing when they composed their texts. However, to the extent that our attempt is successful it does help us avoid the danger of reading meanings into a text that are alien to the meaning intended by its authors and the meaning understood by those to whom the text was originally addressed. The attempt to enter into the world of the inspired authors can also have the advantage of opening us up to the fresh surprise of the inspired texts, and in this way enrich the reflections we make on God's presence and action in our times.

What the author is asserting as being revealed by God

In Chapter Two we focused on the sacred text as a kind of mirror. We were listening for what God is saying to our hearts as we look into the inspired writings. Our attention was on our personal communion with God. This a good thing to do, but it has obvious limitations and obvious dangers. We can easily misunderstand the text. We can find meanings in it that it was never intended to express. We can even use it to support our own bias or prejudice. After all, those who crucified Jesus did so in the name of what they considered to be God's revealed word. The sacred text is more than a mirror. It is a window that opens onto a wonderful world of religious experience from an age and from people whose life experience was quite different from our own. The Second Vatican Council states:

Seeing that, in sacred Scripture, God speaks through people in human fashion, it follows that the interpreter of sacred Scripture, if he is to ascertain what God has wished to communicate to us, should carefully search out the meaning which the sacred writers really had in mind, that meaning which God had thought well to manifest through the medium of the words'.

– Dei Verbum, n.12

Carroll Stuhlmueller offers an important insight when he says that ‘the Bible is theology rooted in the sequence of human events as retold within liturgical celebrations’ (*New Paths through the Old Testament* (Paulist 1989) page 76). He goes on to say: ‘The purpose of the Bible is not to describe ancient events with detailed accuracy, but rather, from the memory of events, to draw listeners into worshipping God and into reliving the hopes of ancestors’ (page 41).

Obviously, liturgical writing can express religious insight and so mediate divine revelation. We find examples of many different literary forms in the Older Testament, for the authors were interested in the truth of God and how God was communicating with them, but they were also interested in teaching, in providing a catechism for believers, and in drawing God’s chosen people to a deeper fidelity to the covenant. The sacred authors may be recording history. They may be using material that is closer to what we are familiar with in an historical novel. They may be composing a fable or drama or proverb, or perhaps a hymn, or epic or legend. They may be presenting a parable. They may be creating an allegory or a lament. The form an author uses depends on his judgment as to how best to communicate the truth that he has been inspired to share. In Chapter Seven we will focus on the use of story in the Older Testament.

Our aim is to open ourselves to the richness of the literature, allowing it to invite us into the religious experience that it expresses. We cannot find the inspired meaning of the text if we by-pass the meaning intended by the human author or the meaning which encouraged the recipients to preserve the word. The Pontifical Biblical Commission in *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993, page 84) writes:

One must reject as unauthentic every interpretation alien to the meaning expressed by the human authors in their written text. To admit the possibility of such alien meanings would be the equivalent of cutting off the biblical message from its root, which is the Word of God in its historical communication; it would also mean opening the door to interpretations of a wildly subjective nature.

To eliminate meanings that cannot be supported by the text and to direct the reader to the range of meanings that can be supported by the text is the task of biblical scholarship. The science of biblical hermeneutics is a systematic attempt to discern the meaning of the text, including the meaning intended by the author and the meaning as grasped by the first readers and by readers since. We will be examining some of the main elements of this science in the following chapter.

Meanings of the biblical text

Let it first be understood that rarely can a text be said to have one and only one meaning (see Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993, page 81). This is especially true of texts that make liberal use of imagery, and most of the texts of the Older Testament come into this category. Even if we could accurately pinpoint the meaning intended by the writer, what is actually written will often contain meanings of which the author was not conscious. Furthermore, those who kept the text may have kept it for reasons other than those originally intended by the writer. Further levels of meaning can be discerned when we examine why those who finally edited the Bible placed the texts in the context in which we now find them.

There is value also in examining how various texts have been understood over time by the living, believing, praying and celebrating community. This whole process comes under the guidance of God's Spirit and can enrich our understanding of a text. As already noted in Chapter Two, the Jewish Rabbis, believing a text to be inspired by God, attempted to find as many meanings as possible in it.

Reflecting on the mystery and richness of God's word, the Pontifical Biblical Commission gives us a timely warning:

One of the characteristics of the Bible is precisely the absence of a sense of systematisation and the presence, on the contrary, of things held in dynamic tension. The Bible is a repository of many ways of interpreting the same events and reflecting upon the same problems. In itself it urges us to avoid excessive simplification and narrowness of spirit.

– 1993, page 94

We would expect to find spiritual meanings in the sacred text. We would expect that the Jewish people of a later date would look back on earlier texts and see in them meanings that went beyond the insights of the original author. This is especially true of the early Christians who saw Jesus as the fulfilment of the spirituality of the Old Testament and who loved to discover texts of the Old Testament that helped them express their insights into Jesus. At the same time it is important to check all these levels of meaning against the actual text.

The literal sense of the text

For more on the literal sense see '*Divino Afflante Spiritu*' (Pius XII, 1943) in *The teaching of the Catholic Church* Ed. Rahner, Neuner & Roos [Mercier, 1967] nn. 3826-3830. Also the Pontifical Biblical Commission: *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993) pages 82-84.

Meaning is found only in a mind. To grasp the literal meaning of a text we need an informed mind, we need to read the text intelligently, and we need to read it in the same spirit in which it was written. Our aim is to discover what the inspired author intended to say, and how his words were understood by those to whom his words were addressed. We want to know why they preserved the text, and why the community of faith continued to treasure it, copy it, and hand it on to others. We want to know how the text was understood by faithful, intelligent readers down through the centuries.

Not all these meanings will be simply identical, but they will give us a range of understandings that will make it possible for us to exclude meanings that contradict them. It will help us distinguish between a genuine understanding that finds support in the text and misunderstandings that can be rejected as inconsistent with the literal meaning of the words as intended by the author and by those who have preserved the text for us. If people state that the literal meaning of the text is the first thought that comes to them when they read it, independent of any of the above considerations, we can have no confidence in their opinion. This does not work for any other writings, why should it work for the Bible?

To find the literal meaning of a biblical text, we must heed the following advice from the Second Vatican Council:

Since all that the inspired authors, or sacred writers, assert should be regarded as asserted by the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture, firmly, faithfully, and without error, teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures’.

– Dei Verbum, n.11

Though this statement lacks precision, it does alert us to the fact that not everything stated in the text is true, but only the inspired insight expressed in the text. God was inspiring real people to write – real people with their mistaken assumptions and an understanding of God that was necessarily imperfect, lacking as it did those insights into God revealed by Jesus. If we want to find out what the inspired author was communicating out of prayer, and so from inspiration, and if we want to share the insight into God and into themselves that the original readers enjoyed and which accounts for the writing being treasured, copied and handed on to us by the believing community, we have to try to put aside our own assumptions and enter into the mind of the author to discover what the truth was that the author intended to convey. In the words of the Vatican Council we must look for the religious truth that the author is ‘asserting’.

The author may state some things that are wrong or very imperfectly understood. The author may be unable in many areas to think outside the cultural horizon of his times. Our interest is not in these culturally limited and even mistaken ideas. It is in that precise judgment about God and about life that the author makes under the inspiration of the Spirit of God.

We can be confident that these judgments and these assertions are true, for God does not inspire error. This is the truth we are to look for, and only this truth. Of course in any and every other matter the author may well be mistaken. But the acceptance of the text by the believing community encourages us to believe that something very precious was communicated to them in and through the text, and that they preserved it as inspired because they kept on finding it to be inspiring and insightful and to disclose something of the presence and action of God in their lives. It is this truth that we wish to discover. We can trust that this truth is a valid insight into reality.

To do so we cannot just follow the first idea that occurs to us. We cannot treat the Bible as though it were a shopping list or a street directory. We cannot ignore the images, the poetry and the drama in it. We cannot reduce it like this as though God can only inspire unimaginative and factual prose. We need to look at the text, understand the meaning of the words as the author uses them, grasp the history of the images used and the medium the author is using to convey his inspired insights, and allow our mind and heart to be moved in prayer by the same Spirit who inspired the author. This is not a complicated process, but we cannot by-pass it if we genuinely want to discover the literal meaning of the text. In the following Chapter we will examine some of the scientific approaches that together help us discover what we have been speaking of as the ‘literal’ sense of the sacred texts.

The spiritual sense

For a fuller explanation of the spiritual sense see the Pontifical Biblical Commission: *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993) pages 84-86.

Those who experienced Jesus, the fulfilment of God's revelation (the Word-made-flesh), were able to look back at the texts of the Older Testament and read them in the light of Jesus' life and words. They saw meanings in the texts that went beyond the understanding of the original author and of those living prior to Jesus. This level of meaning can be seen in the text only under the guidance of Jesus' own Spirit and so has been called, in a special way, the 'spiritual' sense of the text. The Pontifical Biblical Commission (1993, page 85) expresses this in the following words:

We can define the spiritual sense, as understood by Christian faith, as the meaning expressed by the biblical texts when read, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, in the context of the paschal mystery of Christ and of the new life which flows from it ... While there is a distinction between the two senses, the spiritual sense can never be stripped of its connection with the literal sense. The latter remains the indispensable foundation. Otherwise, one could not speak of the 'fulfilment' of Scripture. Indeed, in order that there be fulfilment, a relationship of continuity and of conformity is essential. But it is also necessary that there be transition to a higher level of reality.

The relationship between Scripture and the events which bring it to fulfilment is not one of simple material correspondence. On the contrary, there is mutual illumination and a progress that is dialectic. What becomes clear is that Scripture reveals the meaning of events and the events reveal the meaning of Scripture, that is, they require that certain aspects of the received interpretation be set aside and a new interpretation adopted (pages 91-92).

Ignace de la Potterie SJ (*Reading Holy Scripture 'in the Spirit'*, *Communio* 4, Winter 1986, page 325) writes:

One must distinguish between the letter and the spirit of Scripture. In the study of the letter, it goes without saying that one cannot just go back to the methods and procedures of the ancients, which are out-dated in many respects. One ought here to take advantage of the immense resources of modern exegesis. Nonetheless we should read and interpret in the spirit ... It is not a matter of looking for a 'spiritual sense' beyond the 'literal sense', but of finding one within it. The Spirit in the letter. The aim is to arrive at an 'interior penetration of the text, as it was written for believers by inspired believers, according to their experience of God' (René Laurentin). Literal exegesis must open itself, deepen itself, broaden itself, to become spiritual interpretation.

Examples could be multiplied. The authors of the narrative of the escape from Egypt and the wanderings in the wilderness of the Hebrew slaves who escaped from Egypt under the leadership of Moses composed their text some five hundred years after the event. They drew on all those centuries of oral tradition, and they composed their narrative in dramatic, liturgical language, the purpose of which was to encourage their contemporaries to place their trust in YHWH. The narrative of the manna (Exodus 16) and the narrative of the water from the rock (Exodus 17) speak of our ultimate hunger and our ultimate thirst, which is for God, and convey a clear message. Only God can assuage this hunger and this thirst, and God will do so if we open ourselves to welcome God's grace.

Thus is already a ‘spiritual sense’ for the literature is religious. It focuses on the ultimate reality of the action of God’s Spirit in our lives.

A reading of the New Testament, especially John chapter six, opens up a spiritual meaning that is beyond the intentions of the authors of Exodus, but is entirely consistent with it. John points his readers to Jesus through whom God is offering us a better manna. From the heart of Jesus pierced on Calvary God is offering us a spring of life-giving water that will finally satisfy our deepest longings.

Pope John-Paul II in introducing the 1993 statement by the Pontifical Biblical Commission *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* writes (page 15):

To be recognised as a sense of the biblical text, the spiritual sense must offer proof of its authenticity. A merely subjective inspiration is insufficient. One must be able to show that it is a sense ‘willed by God himself’, a spiritual meaning ‘given by God’ to the inspired text. Determining the spiritual sense, then, belongs to the realm of exegetical science.

This point is expressed in the statement::

To avoid purely subjective readings, an interpretation valid for contemporary times will be founded on the study of the text and such an interpretation will constantly submit its presuppositions to verification by the text.

– 1993, page 80

One must reject as unauthentic every interpretation alien to the meaning expressed by the human authors in their written text. To admit the possibility of such alien meanings would be the equivalent of cutting off the biblical message from its root, which is the Word of God in its historical communication; it would also mean opening the door to interpretations of a wildly subjective nature.

– 1993, page 84

It is right that we play with the Scriptures as a child might play with a fountain or with a prism, delighting in the splash of water or in the myriad colours and reflections of light. It is right that we attempt to break open the word to see the sparks of divine light that emerge from it. As we play with and delight in these sacred words, however, the scholarly pursuit is there to guide us, for the literal meaning of the text, the meaning which the author intended his readers to attain, will always be foundational and a corrective against mistaken conclusions that we might attribute to God but which come from our own fancy, prejudice, or mistaken assumptions.

The fuller sense

For more on the fuller sense see the Pontifical Biblical Commission: *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993) pages 87-88.

Scholars sometimes speak of the ‘fuller sense’ (Latin ‘*sensus plenior*’) of a biblical text. Often in the New Testament an inspired author refers back to a text from the Old Testament as being fulfilled in Jesus. He is not saying that the original author had Jesus in mind. He is not saying that the reference to Jesus was explicitly part of the intended literal meaning.

Rather he is saying that, under divine providence, the truth expressed by the Older Testament author was inspired by God, and that it has come to its full flowering in Jesus. Jesus 'fulfils' the meaning expressed in the ancient text. Jesus 'fills up its meaning' in a way that the ancient author could never have imagined. In hindsight, having experienced Jesus, the Newer Testament author has come to see a fuller and divinely intended meaning in the ancient text. The Pontifical Biblical Commission (1993) explains the term in the following way:

One might think of the 'fuller sense' as another way of indicating the spiritual sense of a biblical text in the case where the spiritual sense is distinct from the literal sense. It has its foundation in the fact that the Holy Spirit, principal author of the Bible, can guide human authors in the choice of expressions in such a way that the latter will express a truth, the fullest depths of which the authors themselves do not perceive. This deeper truth will be more fully revealed in the course of time – on the one hand, through further divine interventions that clarify the meaning of texts and, on the other, through the insertion of texts into the canon of Scripture. In these ways there is created a new context, which brings out fresh possibilities of meaning that had lain hidden in the original context.

– pages 87-88

One example should suffice. When the author of Psalm 34:20 wrote: 'not one of their bones will be broken', he was using a metaphor to make the point that whatever sufferings Israel may undergo, the substance of their communion with God (their 'bones') could never be destroyed. God is faithful to the covenant made with his people. This truth was expressed symbolically when the ancient pastoral feast of slaying a lamb to ensure a successful lambing season was given a new meaning within the cult of Israel. As part of the Passover ritual a lamb was slain, but included in the ritual was the direction: 'you shall not break any of its bones' (Exodus 12:46). In this way they expressed ritually the truth expressed in the psalm.

When John concludes his account of Jesus' death, he writes: 'These things occurred so that the scripture might be fulfilled: None of his bones shall be broken' (John 19:36). Jesus' death is not part of the literal meaning of either the psalm or Exodus. John sees their meaning coming to an amazing fulfilment when people tried to destroy Jesus, but failed, because they could not destroy his communion with God, and from the apparently dead heart of Jesus flowed God's life-giving Spirit.

Likewise, the prophet Zechariah, lamenting the death of king Josiah, wrote: 'they will look upon the one they have pierced' (Zechariah 12:10). The piercing of Jesus' side by the soldier was not part of the literal meaning intended by Zechariah, but John sees the spiritual meaning of Zechariah's text being beautifully and fully realized by Jesus (John 19:37).

Factors that make the reading of the sacred Scriptures difficult

In his Second Letter to Timothy, Paul wrote: ‘All Scripture is inspired by God and can profitably be used for teaching, for refuting error, for guiding people’s lives and for teaching them to be holy’(3:16). As a matter of fact Scripture is used with all the effects mentioned by Paul. However it is also a matter of fact that Scripture is used with exactly the opposite effects as well: for disseminating error and for guiding people’s lives in the wrong direction. Jesus used Scripture beautifully; some of his contemporaries used it to condemn him. We find the same ambivalence today. Since we are quite capable of misunderstanding conversations and written material that belong to our own immediate culture and times, it is not surprising that we can misunderstand the sacred Scriptures. Let us note some of the factors contributing to this.

You may have had the task of sorting out the papers of a deceased friend. Sometimes you find a letter that you cannot understand because you do not know enough about the circumstances in which it was written. A similar problem arises when reading the Bible. Sometimes it is not at all obvious where a certain piece of writing comes from, or when it was written, or the group to which the author belonged. Did he belong to the king’s attendants? Was he a priest? Was he a holy person critical of either of these groups? Without this knowledge, it is obviously easy for us to jump to wrong conclusions and misunderstand the meaning of the text.

Everyone who is familiar with more than one language realises how languages differ and how difficult it is to translate from one language to another without missing some meaning or without introducing a meaning not found in the original. No matter how good a modern English translation might be, it is not the same as knowing the Hebrew or Aramaic or Greek of the original text. And knowing how words were used and understood two thousand years ago is not always a simple task. Without such knowledge we should be slow to be dogmatic about the exactness of our understanding of a biblical text.

There is the whole matter of culture. Even today we can find ourselves misunderstanding a person from another cultural background. We may understand the words, but fail to grasp the intention. We hear what is said, but we hear it within our own horizon of experience and thinking. It may not even occur to us that we have to change our perspective if we wish to engage in meaningful communication. If this is so today, how can we so readily presume to grasp immediately what Isaiah or Jeremiah meant by the words they used?

Much of the Older Testament represents the final form of works that developed over centuries. There was a long process in Judaism from treating the Scripture as ‘sacred story’ able to be interpreted and re-interpreted and reshaped in the light of experience, to treating it as ‘sacred text’ preserved in a fixed, official form. There was a shift from highly adaptable living traditions to a stable body of literature. Remembering the origins in oral tradition of much of the writing helps us in coming to understand the meanings in the text. The texts of Genesis, for example, represent different layers of writing from the 8th (perhaps even earlier) to the 5th century BC. Rather than being a book, it is an edited collection of traditional material. Knowledge of the sources of the final text can considerably enrich our understanding of it.

Factors to remember in reading ancient texts

In his *Introduction to Reading the Pentateuch* (Eisenbrauns, 2006), Jean-Louis Ska SJ, Professor of the Old Testament in the Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome, highlights factors that we, as modern readers, need to be aware of as we read the text (pages 165-183). I will note three of them here. The first is that, for the authors of the Torah and for those for whom they wrote, the value of anything is directly related to its age: the more ancient, the more value. This is not something that we moderns see as obvious. For the ancients it was of primary importance. This is why genealogies are so important. They establish the antiquity of a family or an institution. This is why they begin their legislation so often with: 'YHWH said'. They want the readers to reflect on the origins of their faith and to read the text as expressing insight into the essence of the revelation that brought them into being in the beginning. Much of the Torah is an imaginary reconstruction of the Wilderness Period, for the authors wanted their contemporaries to relate their experiences with that of the first generation of Israelites. The monarchy had failed, but the religion of Israel went back well before the monarchy. The temple had been destroyed, but the cult went back well before the temple. Assyria, Babylon and Persia had proved more powerful militarily than Israel, but it was YHWH, the God of Israel, who created the universe and the nations – all of them.

A major problem facing the returning exiles is that those who had not gone into exile resented their return. The returning exiles wanted to reclaim their land – land that others had occupied in their absence thinking that they would never come back. The returning exiles identified closely with Moses and the people who had escaped from Egypt. Those who had stayed in the land identified with Abraham. A key reason for composing the Pentateuch was to form a united people. It was imperative that both groups come to see that the God who revealed Himself to Moses is the 'God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob' (Exodus 3:6).

Linked to this respect for what is ancient is the essentially conservative stance of the authors. For them ancient laws and customs could not be eliminated even when circumstances required their updating. Whatever may have happened in earlier times, the leaders of post-exilic Judah were anxious to be completely faithful to God's will, so they were meticulously careful not to attempt to harmonise the material that they inherited, even though some of it no longer applied to their changed circumstances. After all, such was their faith in God's presence and action among them that they considered their laws and customs to have a divine origin: a faith expressed in the words 'YHWH said'.

A third and related factor was their desire to demonstrate that the ancient traditions had an ongoing value for their contemporaries. They preserved the ancient material, not as museum pieces, but because they saw it as a revelation from God and they trusted that it could still guide them. We will see how they attempted to point this out in the way they told the stories and in the way they commented on the text. They did not want their contemporaries to get caught up in nostalgia for the past. It was important that they live now in a way that was faithful to God and that would avoid the mistakes of the past for which they had paid such a high price.

It follows from this that, though we have some uncertainty as to how much written material the authors of the text received from earlier generations of writers, we should be confident that the post-exilic authors has a vision of Israel/Judah that transcended their own experience and their own time.

Defective concepts of God

In Chapter Two we pointed out that beauty and truth are always precise, delineated, defined. We then examined what we mean when we claim that the Bible is inspired. Now, in the light of what we have written about the necessarily limited views of those inspired by God to compose these texts, we should look at some of the main limitations of understanding that pervade the literature we are about to study, both in regard to their way of conceiving God, and in their way of understanding the appropriate human response to God's revelation. I am encouraged to do this by the words of Karl Rahner:

Theology can create openings for adventures of the mind and heart, if we have but the courage to embark upon them, and both the courage and the humility to retrace our steps as soon as we become aware of having erred.

– Inspiration in the Bible, page 7

There are as many concepts of God as there are minds that conceive, for God cannot be observed directly, put to the test, and made subject to human comprehension and definition. Many concepts of God are clearly erroneous: the so-called 'god' who controls the world from outside; the so-called 'god' who is exalted at the expense of humanity; the so-called 'god' who upholds vested interests, who justifies the successful, who supports apartheid, patriarchy, hypocritical piety, immature dependency and infantile illusions. 'God' can be a projection of our fears: another word for fate, the stars, demons. 'God' can be a projection of our needs for self-indulgence, prestige, or power. 'God' can be a support for our insecurity, anchoring a meaningless life in submission to a power-object.

We should not expect the authors of the Pentateuch to be completely free from some of these erroneous ways of thinking. As we emphasised when we looked at inspiration, if God is going to inspire someone to communicate a truth, God is going to have to inspire a limited human being. There are no unlimited human beings to inspire! We do not have to assume that the authors of the texts we are going to study knew everything about everything, and, if we are going to appreciate the truth that they were inspired to write, we need to be aware of where their thinking was limited. Three key areas stand out.

Monotheism

In the texts we are studying, YHWH as conceived is a very Israelite God. Only one God was to be worshipped, YHWH, not the gods of foreign nations, or the gods of Canaan. True, in the post-exilic period, the idea of monotheism was in the air, but how thorough was it? Genuine monotheism includes the amazing insight that the mysterious divine presence with whom we experience a profound communion is the one 'God' present and revealed in different ways in different cultures.

Enemies of Israel are enemies of God

A second assumption found throughout much of the Hebrew Scriptures is that the enemies of Israel are also the enemies of God: 'Have no dread or fear of them. YHWH your God, who goes before you, is the one who will fight for you'(Deuteronomy 1:29-30; also 3:22; 20:4); 'I will be an enemy to your enemies and a foe to your foes'(Exodus 23:22; see Numbers 31).

A more universalist view is endorsed by Jesus: 'You have heard that it was said: you shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say to you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous'(Matthew 5:43-45).

A God who controls the world

A third assumption is that God controls nature and history, such that happenings that are judged to be good are seen as expressions of God's blessing, whereas happenings that are judged to be bad are seen as expressions of God's disapproval and punishment. This way of looking at things permeates the texts we are studying. The basis for this misunderstanding is their way of thinking of 'power'. In our human experience power is often abused. It is often expressed as control. When the authors think of God as 'Almighty', declaring their faith that there are no limits to God's power, they have not yet come to the insight (so clear in the life and words of Jesus) that God is love, and consequently that the power God has is the power of love. It is God's love-power that has no limits, not God's exercise of control. No wonder it was difficult for Jesus' contemporaries to see God's 'almighty power' revealed in the one who was crucified on Calvary. Paul recognised this as 'a stumbling block for the Jews'(1Corinthians 1:23).

When, as adults, we experience someone attempting to control us, we do not experience this as love. While love is demanding, and is willing to challenge and correct, it never controls. Love respects others as sacred and respects their freedom. Love does not (cannot) protect us from suffering the consequences of our misuse or abuse of freedom, for love loves; it does not control. The idea of God controlling is so embedded in our psyche that we have to be determined if we are to listen attentively to Jesus, and watch him reveal God as precisely not controlling. Jesus wept with disappointment over Jerusalem; he did not reorganize it. He could see what would happen to the city if people did not change, but he did not punish it. Jesus pleaded with Judas; he did not take control. Throughout the texts we are studying there is a clear assumption that God is the one ultimately deciding what happens.

In saying that God does not control the world we are not saying that God is doing nothing. God loves. This is the love of which Paul speaks: 'Love has space enough to hold and to bear everything and everyone. Love believes all things, hopes all things, and endures whatever comes. Love does not come to an end'(1Corinthians 13:7-8). We have come to see that creation is free to evolve according to the natural interaction of its energies. God does not intervene to cut across this. God is constantly acting in creation, – by loving.

When creation is open to God's action, beautiful, 'miraculous' things happen. This is the way God has chosen creation to be: an explosion of love, and so an explosion of being that is free and not determined. We experience this.

When we open ourselves to welcome God's providence, divine love bears fruit in our lives. Closing ourselves to God's gracious will is what we call sin. God respects our freedom even when our choices hurt us and hurt others. But God continues to offer healing, forgiving, creating love.

Many of the writings of the Older Testament state this, and state it beautifully, but they are not consistent, and the way the authors understand God's relationship with the world is quite different from the way we have seen it through the life and teaching of Jesus. We do not assume that Jerusalem was destroyed because of human sin. However, it is clear that Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the authors of the Books of Kings thought this way. Jesus' contemporaries assumed that a person was blind because he was being punished for sin (see John 9:2). They assumed Jesus was being punished by God when they saw him being crucified. They were wrong. We no longer assume that things happen because they are either directly willed or directly allowed by a God who controls everything. If we are looking for what God is doing we have learned to look for love. We do not – or at least we should not – assume that it was God who determined that Jesus would be crucified. He was crucified by people who chose to resist God's will. What God willed was that Jesus respond in love, and that is what happened, because Jesus chose to listen and to respond to grace.

The authors of the Older Testament understood miracles as divine intervention, rather than as examples of what happens when we human beings open ourselves to God's constant loving action in our lives and in our world. To use Jesus' image, the sun and the rain are constant and are offered to everyone. 'Miracles' are what happens when we open ourselves to the 'sun' and the 'rain' – when we welcome God's action and allow God's grace to bear fruit in our lives.

The understanding present in the texts of the Older Testament is still shared by many. Some still want God to intervene when what we should be doing is opening ourselves to love, and helping others to do the same. If we were to do this, think of the 'miracles' that would happen in this world: miracles that only love can make possible. Jesus revealed God as love. God's love is all-powerful. We can pray, like a child, for whatever it is we desire, so long as we open ourselves to love and allow love to work its purifying and energising effect in us and in our world – so long as we conclude our prayer, as Jesus did, with the words: 'Not my will but yours be done' (14:36).

In the course of history these texts have inspired people from every culture. Their meaning has also been covered over, much as wood is covered with layer upon layer of paint till we have no idea of its native beauty. People continue to use the texts to claim divine authority for their own prejudices and unexplored assumptions. The texts have purified cultures. Cultures have also accommodated the texts to support their failure to be converted by them. We cannot avoid bringing our own assumptions to the text in the questions we ask of it, and so in the answers we find.

But at least we must make the effort to check what we claim as our insights by examining the meaning of the words used – the meaning then, not now – and the literary forms, and the way the editors chose to link their sources.

Post-script: The relationship of Sacred Scripture and Tradition

The following statement by Raymond Brown, a leading Catholic Scripture scholar, sets out clearly the place of the Sacred Scriptures in the Tradition (‘handing on’) of the faith of the Church:

If Vatican II was wise in rejecting a two-source formula (all revelation may be found in Scripture and Tradition, conceived as separate sources), it was just as wise in not phrasing its statement on the subject in terms of an exclusively “in Scripture” formula. Revelation involves God’s action for the salvation of men and the interpretation of that action by people whom God has raised up and guided for that purpose – in short, it involves both deeds and words motivated by God. Now the truly revelatory action of God bringing about human salvation is found in what God has done in Israel and what God has done in Jesus, and this action is described in the books of Scripture. Scripture also offers an interpretation of that action (for example, the interpretation of the Sinai covenant by the prophets, and the interpretation of Jesus’ mission by himself and by the apostles). This scriptural interpretation of God’s revelatory action is the most important and essential interpretation, so that there is an enduring responsibility to Scripture.

But the scriptural interpretation is still a limited interpretation; it reflects the understanding of God’s action in a period that extends approximately from 1000BC to 125AD. God’s action for human salvation came to a climax in Jesus Christ who is once and for all (Hebrews 10:10), but there is no reason to believe that God has ceased to guide the interpretation of that action. Indeed the subsequent role of the Spirit in the history of the Church and in the history of mankind, the writings of the Fathers and theologians, the pronouncements of the Church – all of these enter into what we call Tradition, which is the post-scriptural interpretation of the saving action of God described in Scripture.

If one has to propose a formula describing where one can find revelation, instead of saying that all revelation is in Scripture, I would prefer to say: ‘The revelation of God to humankind is found in God’s action on behalf of our salvation, as that action is interpreted by the Scriptures themselves and by later authoritative Tradition’. The importance of Scripture is that it contains both the narrative of that action and the fundamental interpretation of that action, but there can be consequent, normative interpretation of God’s action that is not found in Scripture.

– R. Brown *Jesus: God and Man* (NY:Macmillan, 1967) pages 57-58 note 29

Reading the Scriptures from within the community which has preserved them

While doing all we can to read the texts of the Older Testament within their own context, it remains important that the texts be read from within the faith community to which they belong. Many holy and wise people before us, and many wise and holy people today, are reading and studying the sacred writings. It is important that we read it from within this community of faith. For Christians, this means to read the texts in the light of Jesus, the one in whom God’s word was made flesh, and in our reading to be guided by his Spirit. Yet even here, this is not enough.

Even with the help of Jesus walking with them the disciples on the road to Emmaus did not understand the meaning of the scriptures till they encountered Jesus ‘in the breaking of bread’ (Luke 24:35). It is at the Eucharist, when Jesus’ disciples assemble, that the texts have their proper place, just as they were read when the people of Israel assembled in the temple or the synagogue to remember and to celebrate their faith.

The Pontifical Biblical Commission (1993, page 103) writes:

The Spirit is, assuredly, given to individual Christians, so that their hearts can ‘burn within them’ (Luke 24:32) as they pray and prayerfully study the Scripture within the context of their own personal lives. This is why the Second Vatican Council insists that access to Scripture be facilitated in every possible way (Dei Verbum, 22 and 25). This kind of reading, it should be noted, is never completely private, for the believer always reads and interprets Scripture within the faith of the Church and then brings back to the community the fruit of that reading, for the enrichment of the common faith.

There is a necessary and unbreakable interaction between the sacred writings, whether of Judaism or of Christianity, and the community which treasured them, preserved them, and handed them on. The written word has its home within the faith-community, for it was the faith of this community which recognised it as indeed the ‘word of God’. We would not have the Bible were it not for the believers who preserved it, so one cannot take the Bible outside the tradition of faith and fossilise some ‘objective’ meaning that stands apart from the community and its faith.

It must also be remembered that not every document was accepted by the community just because it existed. Usage provided a filter that separated out for preservation material that engaged people’s faith experience. This is the basis for our confidence in the inspired nature of the documents that were finally accepted by the community in the official canon. The communities protected themselves against points of view which, while perhaps claiming to be inspired, were judged to be heretical when tested against the authentic religious experience of those people in the community who were judged to be especially holy.

The Pontifical Biblical Commission (1993, pages 52-53) gives us the following advice:

It is the believing community that provides a truly adequate context for interpreting canonical texts. In this context faith and the Holy Spirit enrich exegesis. Church authority, exercised as a service of the community, must see to it that this interpretation remains faithful to the great Tradition which has produced the texts.

As we read the Bible we should stay in touch with the religious community within which the Scriptures were written, treasured and preserved, allowing our minds and hearts to be enriched by the long tradition of prayerful meditation that has gone on in the community from the first generation up till now. Past interpretations do not exhaust the meaning of Scripture. But many wise words have been uttered and we would be foolish to by-pass them, thinking that our own personal meaning is right just because it is ours.

Let us also share our insights with others and learn from their spiritual experiences, learning from the past, but open, too, to the surprising new insights that the Spirit can bring to us through these sacred words.

The need to avoid biblical fundamentalism

The problem with fundamentalism is that it sets the Bible itself outside the living tradition, and then proceeds to ‘objectify’ individual texts, taking them out of the process and context within which alone they have a place. A flower arrangement may well be ‘inspired’, but that does not mean that one can take a single flower or part thereof and isolate it from the rest and claim inspiration for it.

Biblical fundamentalism is but one symptom of the neglect of mysticism in recent Western Christianity. Rightly impressed with the results of the scientific method, some in the West have tended to look for assurance in their religious lives not in their relationship with a community of faith in which they find their mind and heart moved to live in ways that affirm the living tradition of faith, but in something ‘objective’ – the written text of the Bible understood as being from every point of view inerrant.

We must avoid the quick fix, the quick dogmatic solution, the quick Scripture text that puts a stop to our inquiring mind and searching spirit. We must reject this in the name of reason and of faith. We must be wary of those who, unable to dispense with their masks, afraid of the journey of discovery, and unwilling to face up to the poverty of their findings, hide behind God’s name and use what they claim to be the ‘word of God’ to attract others who are hungry for spiritual nourishment.

As intelligent people we must love God with our minds as well as with our hearts, and this demands of us that, if we wish to be informed by the writings which have been preserved as sacred by the Christian community, we must be willing to go to the trouble to discover their meaning, using all the historical and literary tools available.

The great enemy of fundamentalism is scientific study of the Bible that takes it seriously as an inspired human document, and attempts to find its meaning in its own historical and literary terms. This scientific study involves discernment, and some uncertainty. It takes away the simple, rock-like security that the fundamentalist is seeking. This false security, however, must be discarded, for only ‘the truth will set you free’ (John 8:32).

The Pontifical Biblical Commission (1993, page 94) writes:

One of the characteristics of the Bible is precisely the absence of a sense of systematisation and the presence, on the contrary, of things held in dynamic tension. The Bible is a repository of many ways of interpreting the same events and reflecting upon the same problems. In itself it urges us to avoid excessive simplification and narrowness of spirit.

This same commission gives an excellent summary of the errors in fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible (pages 72-75). It includes the following remark:

The basic problem with fundamentalist interpretation is that, refusing to take into account the historical character of biblical revelation, it makes itself incapable of accepting the full truth of the Incarnation itself ... It refuses to admit that the inspired Word of God has been expressed in human language and that this Word has been expressed, under divine inspiration, by human authors possessed of limited capacities and resources.

– page 73

God has revealed himself to the inspired authors within the limits of their experience and knowledge. Guided by the Spirit of God, these authors have communicated revealed truth using a range of appropriate literary forms. It is our task to read the words carefully, and to open our minds and hearts to the spiritual experience and insight which the words were intended to express.

Origen, the first great Scripture scholar and head of the catechetical school of Alexandria early in the third century, gave the following warning to his contemporaries:

The reason why all those whom we have mentioned hold false opinions, and make impious or ignorant assertions about God, appears to be nothing else but this, that Scripture is not understood in its spiritual sense, but is interpreted according to the bare letter.

– *De Principiis* 4,2

To read the Sacred Scripture is to accept an invitation to prayer

The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation reminds us that to reflect on God's word is to enter into a place of prayer:

God reveals himself ... to invite and receive into his own company (n.2).

Growth in insight into the realities and words that are being passed on comes through the contemplation and study of believers who ponder these things in their hearts ... It comes from the intimate sense of spiritual realities which they experience (n.8).

In the sacred books the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet his children and talks with them... The Word of God is strength for their faith, food for the soul, and a pure and lasting fount of spiritual life (n.21).

The first psalm in the psalter speaks of those whose:

delight is in the law of YHWH. They meditate on his word day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.

For the sacred Scripture to be a source of inspiration for us, let us take the text into our hearts and be attentive to the movement of the Spirit, for the Bible invites us to dialogue with God. As we contemplate the inspired word, we can learn to hear God speaking to us in the depths of our hearts. We can find an echo of the inspired word resonating in our minds and hearts as we prayerfully reflect upon it.

We believe that 'God's love has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (Romans 5:5). This is the same Spirit who inspired the writing of the text and its preservation. The Christian community invites us to enter into dialogue with this sacred text, trusting our hearts to the Spirit of Christ. Of course we are not meant to leave our intelligence behind when we pray. We are called to love God with all our minds as well as with all our hearts, and we would be foolish to follow without discernment every feeling and every 'inspiration' we thought we were receiving when reading the Scriptures. But the fact remains that we should begin reading and end reading with the knowledge that we are entering a sacred place, and with the expectation that God is inviting us into communion with him as we read.

We can listen to the words of Scripture as we might listen to beautiful music or as we might enjoy a stroll through an art gallery. We might like to find a quiet place in our home or garden or looking out over the water or under our favourite tree. We might like to light a small candle in our room and open the Bible. Let us begin by praying to be in touch with our own heart and with the Spirit of God who moves there, speaking his word to us now and inviting us now to a special communion of love.

We might choose a passage that attracts us, not fixing its meaning too tightly, but joyfully playing with it as a child might play. Let the text be like a mirror for us, a pool of silence. It is like a candle flickering out there. We are invited to watch for the responding flicker in our own heart. In the meantime, outside our periods of reflective reading, let us take up the journey of study, slowly and gradually. We will find that our mind and heart will become more and more enlightened, more and more open to the divine surprises that are in the text. Do not worry about how much we do not know. Be grateful for the tiny pieces of knowledge that enrich us. They will enlarge the ways God can use the written word to speak to us, and to be in communion with us. We would do well to follow the advice of Saint Ephraem (4th century, Syria):

Lord, who can grasp all the wealth of just one of your words? What we understand is much less than what we leave behind, like thirsty people who drink from a fountain. For your word, Lord, has many shades of meaning, just as those who study it have many different points of view. The Lord has coloured his words with many hues so that each person who studies it can see in it what he or she loves. The Lord has hidden many treasures in his word so that each of us is enriched as we meditate on it ... Coming into contact with some share of its treasure, you should not think that the only thing contained in the word is what you yourself have found'.

– *Commentary on the Diatessaron*, I,18-19