

CHAPTER FOUR

SACRED SCRIPTURE

(Catechism nn. 101-141)

Reading the Bible

After presenting a summary of the Church's teaching on Revelation and Tradition, the Catechism invites us to reflect on Sacred Scripture (n. 101-141). As Catholics we have a particularly rich resource provided by the magisterium: the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation of the Second Vatican Council (*Dei Verbum*, 1965). We also have three documents published by the Pontifical Biblical Commission: one in 1993 entitled *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*; a second in 2001 entitled *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*; and a third entitled *The Bible and Morality: biblical roots of Christian conduct* in 2008.

The Church's teaching on the Bible is as old as the Church itself. Those who read Latin or Italian can consult the '*Enchiridion Biblicum: Documenti della Chiesa sulla sacra Scrittura*' (Edizioni Dehoniane Bologna, 1994). It goes for 1450 pages, covering official statements by the magisterium on matters concerned with the Bible from the second century to today. For English speakers there is '*The Church and the Bible: official documents of the Catholic Church*' (836 pages edited by Dennis Murphy MSC and published by Theological Publications of India 2001).

Pope John-Paul II sets the stage for our examining of the Bible by underlining the spirit in which we should read and study these inspired writings. In his Introduction to the 1993 document from the Commission he writes:

'To arrive at a completely valid interpretation of words inspired by the Holy Spirit, one must first be guided by the Holy Spirit and it is necessary to pray for that, to pray much, to ask in prayer for the interior light of the Spirit and docilely accept that light, to ask for the love that alone enables one to understand the language of God who is love. While engaged in the work of interpretation, one must remain in the presence of God as much as possible'(n. 9).

How to read a sacred text

The Commission (1993, page 120) has some advice for us as we open the Bible, seeking for closer communion with God and for guidance in our lives. Firstly, one should 'hear the Word from within one's own real situation.' The earliest parts of the Bible were composed over 2,700 years ago, and the Newer Testament nearly 2,000 ago. None of it was written directly for us, so we should not expect it to give direct answers to our questions. It is not a list of abstract truths that apply equally to all times and to all cultures. Rather, it is an inspired response to revelation by real people in a real situation, and it has continued to be a source of revelation and wisdom for generation after generation. But we have to read and reflect upon it from within our own actual situation.

Secondly, we need to 'identify the aspects of the present situation highlighted or put in question by the biblical text.' Some texts have little or no relevance to us because sometimes our situation is radically different from that to which the text was addressed. Obvious examples would be the cult rubrics contained in the Book of Leviticus, but other examples could be multiplied. Since human nature is basically the same, however, the insights contained in the inspired text will often continue to assist us. It is important to try to identify those areas of our lives as individuals and as a society that the sacred texts shed light on.

Thirdly, we are to 'draw from the fullness of meaning contained in the biblical text those elements capable of advancing the present situation in a way that is productive and consonant with the saving will of God in Christ.'

The meaning the author intended to convey

Each of these three points assumes the ongoing scientific task of trying to discover what the inspired author intended to say when he wrote, and how the text was understood by those for whom it was first intended. This is not always easy to do, and even when we are successful we should remember that 'written texts are open to a plurality of meanings' (1993, page 81). We must also recognise that the inspired authors did not get everything right. Speaking of the Older Testament, did not Jesus say: 'It was said to you of old, but I say to you' (Matthew 5:21ff)? The Catechism acknowledges that the Older Testament is 'imperfect and provisional' (n. 122). We must also resist the tendency to think that because God inspired the sacred authors, their words must express a truth that is above place, time and culture, and that God will ensure that people of good will are able immediately to grasp the truth of the sacred words without any need to understand the meaning of the words used, or the literary form employed, or indeed the biases that distorted the judgment of the inspired authors.

Human language inspired by God

The biblical texts are inspired, but the language is human. The Catechism (n. 101) quotes from the Council:

'Indeed the words of God, expressed in human words, are in every way like human language, just as the Word of the eternal Father, when he took on himself the flesh of human weakness, became like us' (DV 13).

Jesus was not an abstract human being. He was real flesh and blood. He was a Jew and he revealed God to real people in a real place at a real time using real words and doing real deeds. It was in his precise, unique, and necessarily limited, reality that he attracted people to God. Similarly with the multitude of texts that make up the Bible. They reveal God in their precise limitations. They mean this, and they do not mean that. They do not give us direct, unmediated, access to God or God's will. Like Jesus they are a 'way': at their best they mediate the divine. It is in their precise limitation that they offer a way of connecting us to God who cannot be contained by them, but necessarily remains transcendent. In his commentary on the Gospel of John, Augustine wrote:

'John did not express the entire reality, but said what a human being was capable of saying' (*Tractate* 1.1.2).

He could do no other. The inspired authors are real, limited human beings with limited points of view, using a limited language. We are all necessarily limited – which does not mean that we cannot be inspired. Limited human beings are capable of revealing God in many wonderful ways, including the written word.

In an article in the Journal *Theological Studies* (1981), Raymond Brown wrote:

'The Bible is the literary objectification of a faith that is a response to revelation.'

A response to God's inspiration

He went on to define Scripture as:

‘divine revelation to which human beings have given expression in words.’

In the New Jerome Biblical Commentary, in an article on inspiration, Ray Collins urges the following caution:

‘Though canonised by long usage, “word of God” should not be used of the Scriptures without further hermeneutical reflection ... A distance is to be maintained conceptually between the scriptural expression and the self-communication of God in itself ... Theologically it is less confusing to state that the Scriptures witness to the word of God.’

M. Schmaus (*God in Revelation*, 1968, page 188) agrees:

‘What we encounter in the Sacred Scriptures is first of all the objectivisation of the belief in and understanding of Christ that was possessed by the Church or the local congregation. In other words it is the answer to the revelation of God. In this answer, however, the word of God itself is expressed, for this word has entered into the answer of the Church and is effective in it. On the other hand we must not forget that God's word, which enters into our human answer of faith, nevertheless always transcends it.’

God is constantly drawing us to God's Self in love. We are especially grateful to the inspired authors who have given expression to their religious insights, which enlighten us in a special and privileged way. In the Catechism we read (n. 104):

‘In Sacred Scripture, the Church constantly finds her nourishment and her strength, for she welcomes it not as a human word, “but as what it really is, the word of God”(1Thessalonians 2:13).’

We must keep in mind the important qualification offered above by Collins and Schmaus.

The Catechism goes on to quote from the Vatican Council (DV 21):

‘In the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet his children and talks with them.’

This does not take away the need to try to understand what the text is saying. The Commission (1993) writes:

‘The Word of God finds expression in the work of human authors. The thought and the words belong at one and the same time both to God and to human beings, in such a way that the whole Bible comes at once from God and from the inspired human author. This does not mean, however, that God has given the historical conditioning of the message a value that is absolute’ (page 113).

‘The exegete need not put absolute value in something that simply reflects limited human understanding ... 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’ (page 94).

The truth revealed in the sacred text

The Catechism (n.107) insists that ‘the inspired books teach the truth.’ It goes on to quote the Vatican Council (DV 11):

‘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.’

This is a complex issue, for examples can be given from the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings of the Older Testament where the judgment of the author is contradicted by the insights shared by Jesus. Again and again when reading the ancient texts we are to hear Jesus say: ‘It was said to you of old, but I say to you’ (Matthew 5:21ff).

As regards the Torah, not all the texts are clear as regards monotheism. It is sufficient to recall the commandment: ‘You shall not have strange gods before me’ (Exodus 20:3). Furthermore there is a prevailing assumption that the enemies of Israel are God’s enemies: ‘I will be an enemy to your enemies’ (Exodus 23:22). Jesus explicitly contradicts this:

‘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).

Often the authors also assumed that it was God who caused events. They failed to take seriously the freedom that is essential to the human condition. This skewed their interpretation of events, so that they tended to see success as a blessing from God and failure as divine punishment.

We find the same limitations in the writings of the prophets and the other texts of the Older Testament. Readers will be familiar with some jarring words in the Psalms. At the close of a lyrical hymn composed in the Exile, the Psalmist refers to Judah’s enemies: ‘Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock’ (Psalm 137:9). In the Wisdom of Ben Sira the reader is advised not to give food to those who do not recognise God. The reason he gives is that ‘the Most High also hates sinners’ (Sirach 12:6). The author ‘detests the foolish people that live in Shechem’ (Sirach 50:26).

The Older Testament is, of course, full of wonderful insights into life and into God, but the writers were men of their time and culture, as, of course, were the writers responsible for the Newer Testament.

Instead of attempting to see into the mind and intention of God, it seems better to focus on the insights and oversights of the human authors, while at the same time recognising that the authors of scripture are responding to God’s inspiration (see Catechism n. 105).

Fundamentalism

Inspired by God, people can express their insights in factual accounts, poetry, epic, myth, historical novels, comedy etc. All these are ways of communicating insights. If we think that making factual statements is the only way people can communicate truth, we need to recognize the seriousness of our ignorance – which brings us to the modern problem of fundamentalism. The subject is vast. Hopefully two statements from *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993) will suffice to alert us to the nature of this very pervasive and very destructive phenomenon.

‘When fundamentalists relegate exegetes to the role of translators only (failing to grasp that translating the Bible is already a work of exegesis) and refuse to follow them further in their studies, these same fundamentalists do not realise that, for all their very laudable concern for total fidelity to the Word of God, they proceed in fact along ways which will lead them far away from the true meaning of the biblical texts’ (page 132).

‘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).

Literal and ‘spiritual’ meanings

As noted earlier, the Pontifical Biblical Commission reminds us that ‘written texts are open to a plurality of meanings’ (page 81). This is especially true of texts that make liberal use of imagery, and most of the texts of the Bible come into this category. Then again, 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 providential guidance of God’s Spirit and can enrich our understanding of a text.

The Commission adds the following advice:

‘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’ (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’ (page 84).

The Catechism (n.115-119) speaks of the 'literal' and the 'spiritual' meanings of scripture. A fuller treatment is given in the 1993 document from the Pontifical Biblical Commission. The literal meaning (pages 82-84) is necessarily basic. By 'literal' we do not mean the obvious meaning for a person who is uninformed. We mean what the author was actually asserting as true in the realm of religious truth. We use all the methods made available by modern science to help us discover this. 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. 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 that it disclosed 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 – the 'literal' truth – is a valid insight into reality.

On the 'spiritual' meaning, the 1993 Commission writes:

'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' (page 85).

In an article in the magazine *Communio* (1986/4), Ignace de la Potterie SJ writes:

'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. Literal exegesis must open itself, deepen itself, and broaden itself, to become spiritual interpretation.'

The critical point here is to ensure that in our desire to penetrate into deeper meanings that we can attain by reading texts in the reflected light of what we have learned from Jesus' life, death and resurrection, we do not lose contact with the literal meaning.

The 1993 Commission advises:

'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 conformity is essential. But it is also necessary that there be transition to a higher level of reality'(page 85).

The Canon of Scripture (Catechism n. 120)

By ‘canon’ we mean the list of writings that are accepted by the Church as comprising the inspired texts included in the Bible. The declaration that a piece of writing belongs to the Bible is a recognition that it is inspired. It is not a declaration that other writings are not inspired. Nor is there any suggestion that God is no longer revealing God’s Self to us today. Declaring an inspired writing to be part of the canon of Sacred Scripture is a declaration that this inspired writing belongs among those writings that are recognised as a standard against which all other writings and teaching must be measured.

Much of what was written by Jews and Christians prior to and after the time of Jesus has undoubtedly been lost because people did not take the trouble to preserve it. Other writings were preserved, but were not accepted by the general body of the religious community, or were rejected by it as lacking authenticity. The writings that make up what is known as the Bible are those that people of faith accepted, reflected upon in their assemblies, and continued to treasure. For this reason we have the community’s guarantee that these writings were judged to be truly inspired, because they were found to be truly inspiring, and to give expression to this inspiration in ways that continued to reveal God.

The texts that have been accepted as inspired are those that have been treasured in the community and used in its liturgy. The article on ‘*Canonicity*’ in the *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* states (page 1037):

‘Public reading within the church gives these writings a “pulpit” from which they can guide the lives of the people.’

In speaking of the canon, it is important to avoid the mistake of thinking that the writings as we have them came straight from the ‘pen’ of one or other author. It is important to realise that God did not directly inspire David to write 150 psalms in such a way that the text we now have is exactly the text that the inspired David wrote. The same must be said of the Book of Isaiah, or Jeremiah, or Ezekiel. It is essential to recognize the fluid nature of the material that is now found in the various ‘books’ of the Older Testament. The prophetic oracles were seen as giving expression to a living word from a living God dealing with living people. And so the material was written, treasured, edited, updated, and made relevant to changing circumstances.

The earliest writing probably dates from the eighth century BC. Some time in the sixth and fifth centuries BC, possibly due to pressure from the Persian rulers, the text of the basic constitution of Israel, the Torah, was completed in the form that we still have today. Gradually this happened for the rest of the Bible. The existence of the two books of Chronicles indicates that instead of re-editing and re-imagining the history of the kings, the people felt the need to keep the Books of Samuel and Kings (which the Jewish Bible includes among ‘the early prophets’), and write separate books (‘Chronicles’, included among ‘the writings’), even though they cover much the same ground. The Prologue to the book of Sirach, from towards the end of the second century BC, divides the Books of the Older Testament into three categories: ‘the Torah, the Prophets and the other writings.’ These categories are still used today.

Work on the Jewish Palestinian canon appears to have taken place at Jamnia (Javneh) towards the close of the first century AD. The growth of the Christian community meant that a lot of Jews were accepting Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. This, along with the destruction of Jerusalem (70AD), was seen by the Jewish leaders as posing a serious threat to Judaism. They felt the need to establish a fixed canon of the books that they considered sacred. Among the criteria used in fixing the canon was that the writings had to be in Hebrew, and had to be ancient. No writings from the first century BC were included, and the only book from the second century BC was Daniel, accepted because some of the material in it is quite ancient, and because it was considered prophetic. Jews in the Greek-speaking diaspora, especially Alexandria, had a number of writings that were popular in their synagogues and were considered inspired. Some were translated from the Hebrew and some were composed in the Greek language. These were not included in the Palestinian canon, but this does not mean they were not inspired and inspiring. When Christianity emerged, Greek was the language of commerce and communication, even in Palestine. Christian Jews, therefore, continued using the Books in the Greek Version, including Books not recognized by the Jewish leadership as part of the Hebrew canon.

This is how things stood in the Eastern and Western Church till, at the time of the Protestant Reformation, some of the reformers decided to limit the sacred books to the Jewish Palestinian canon. They seem to have thought, wrongly, that the Palestinian canon was the canon at the time of Jesus. Today, all Christian Bibles worthy of the name include all the books of the Hebrew and Greek Older Testaments, while recognizing that not all are of equal value.

As regards the canon of the Newer Testament, the main difference is that the Newer Testament writings emerged in a much shorter space of time, basically the second half of the first century. The criterion for acceptance was basically the same simple criterion that governed the writings of the Older Testament: the canon included those writings that Christian communities treasured and wanted to hear read in the assembly. The earliest extant list comes from the opening years of the third century when Eusebius of Caesarea (*History of the Church* 3.25) lists writings that were accepted by Christian communities, writings that were disputed, and writings that were rejected. There is no point in listing the rejected books, but it is interesting that his list of disputed books consists in letters that are now in our Bibles: the Letters of James, Jude, Second Peter and Second and Third John. Athanasius (367AD) also has a list, which is identical with the books we have in our Bibles today. We find the same list also in canon 36 of the local Council of Carthage in 397AD, and repeated in the Council of Trent (1546AD) and the First Vatican Council (1870AD).

For the list of books in the canon see the Catechism n. 120.

Basing our trust on the presence of the Spirit of Jesus guiding the Christian Church, we can be confident that the books listed in the canon are inspired, and, while some are more central than others, all have something to offer us in revealing God and in nourishing our desire to know God, and in helping us respond authentically, in justice and kindness, to the many challenges of our current age.

The community's book

The Bible is a precious treasure, communicating in written words the religious experience of many faithful and inspired people. Of special value is the Newer Testament, and Christians have learned to read the Older Testament in the light of the revelation given by Jesus (see the Catechism n. 129). At the same time it would be a mistake to separate the Bible from the lived religious experience of the Christian community. Written words are not the only way of communicating and sharing faith. The main vehicle for handing on revelation has been the lives of good people. Our reflections on the Bible must be made, as the structure of the Catechism makes clear, in the context of the many and wonderful ways in which 'God comes to meet us.'