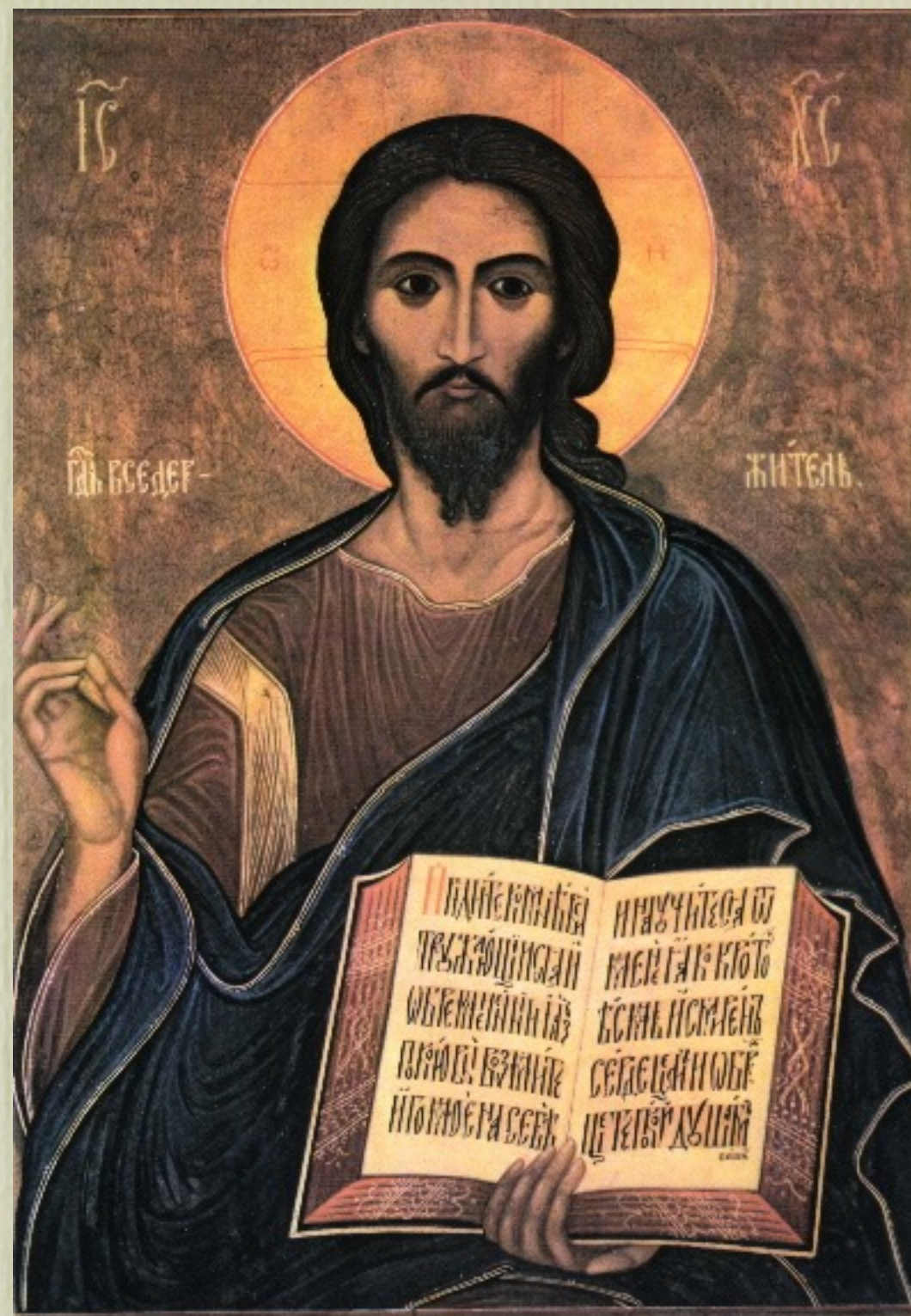


## 05. Interpreting and Understanding the Texts





## Hermeneutics [hermeneuein, 'to explain']

The science concerned with ascertaining the authentic meaning of a biblical text.

## Exegesis ['interpretation']

The craft of leading the reader out of ignorance into knowledge by applying the principles of the science of hermeneutics to a particular text.



## Hermeneutics: searching out the meaning of the text

The sacred text acts like a mirror. We look at it and we see ourselves reflected there. Listening to the text, we are listening to God who is drawing us into closer communion. It is with this attitude that we should approach the text and this is the spirit that should inform all our reading and study.



John-Paul II, Introduction to 'The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church'  
(Pontifical Biblical Commission, PBC 1993)

'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.'



Pontifical Biblical Commission, PBC 1993, page 120

‘The task of interpretation involves three steps:

1. to hear the Word from within one’s own concrete situation;
2. to identify the aspects of the present situation highlighted or put in question by the biblical text;
3. 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 biblical text is more than a mirror. It is also a window inviting us to look beyond ourselves and to enter the world of Israel to discover what the writers and original readers of the text understood about God and their relationship with God.

There is a problem if our attention is only on our own responses. We may be unable to grasp any meaning that lies beyond our present horizons. We may be closed to or just unaware of the power that the text has to shake us free from our false assumptions.



- If we were able to know not just how we respond to the text, but what the original author was asserting when he wrote it, and why the original readers and those who came after them thought it worth preserving, the words of Scripture, inspired by God, may be able to call us to a radical conversion.
- Finding the answer to questions of meaning in a methodical way is the aim of the science of biblical hermeneutics.
- Applying the principles of the science to individual texts is the craft of exegesis.



Reading Scripture from within the community that has preserved it

‘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’(PBC 1993 page 103).



‘Written texts are open to a plurality of meanings’(1993, 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.
- 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.



PBC 1993, pages 132-133

‘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, as well as from full acceptance of the consequences of the Incarnation. The eternal Word became incarnate at a precise period of history, within a clearly defined cultural and social environment.’



- Further levels of meaning can be discerned when we examine why those who finally compiled 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.



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).



- The Jewish Rabbis, believing a text to be inspired by God, attempted to find as many meanings as possible in it. They recognised that God is mysterious, and they were on the look out for all the glimpses of the mystery that they could get.
- They were fond of quoting the words of Jeremiah: ‘Does not my word burn like a fire – it is Yahweh who speaks – is it not like a hammer shattering a rock?’(Jeremiah 23:29).
- Flint, struck by a hammer, shatters into myriad splinters of light. The word of God is no less rich and the Rabbis wanted to be open to the many surprising ways in which God could enlighten them through the text as they attempted to break it open.



Paul continued along the same lines. He had learned this as a Pharisee. He, too, expected there to be meanings hidden in the text. For him it was Jesus who revealed these hidden meanings.

Paul loved to quote from the Bible. He did so, however, not to clarify the meaning as intended by the author, but to show how Jesus 'fulfilled' the Scripture, that is to say, revealed its full meaning as intended by God.



Origen (died 254AD), the first great Scripture Scholar of the Christian world, followed the method used by Paul. He read and explained the 'meaning' of the Scriptures in the light reflected by Jesus.

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 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.



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.



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.’



## The literal meaning

- The inspired books communicate truth.

God can surely inspire factual accounts, poetry, epic, myth, historical novels, comedy - and all these are ways of communicating truth.

“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**”(Vatican II, DV II).’

- 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.



Raymond Brown (CBQ July 1963, 278)

‘The literal sense answers the question of what this text meant according to its author’s intention as that author was inspired to compose it in his particular stage in the history of God’s plan of salvation.’

We need an informed mind that reads the text intelligently and in the same spirit in which it was written.

What was the author intending to communicate? How was his writing understood at the time? Why was it cherished, preserved, copied, handed on?

Meanings must find support in the text.



- 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.



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.



## ‘Spiritual Sense’

‘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’ (PBC 1993, 15).

When meanings occur to us on reading the text we can reflect upon and share them, but we cannot claim them as the meaning of the text without checking them against an informed reading of the text.



‘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’ (1993, page 85)



‘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’(1993, pages 91-92).



‘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, broaden itself, to become spiritual interpretation.’(Ignace de la Potterie, *Communio* 4,1986, 325).



## The literal meaning is spiritual

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 six 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. They 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.



## 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.

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 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).



PBC 1993, pages 132-133

‘Anyone who desires to understand the Word of God should humbly seek it out there where it has made itself visible and accept to this end the necessary help of human knowledge.

Addressing men and women, from the beginnings of the Old Testament onward, God made use of all the possibilities of human language, while at the same time accepting that his word be subject to the constraints caused by the limitations of this language. Proper respect for inspired Scripture requires undertaking all the labours necessary to gain a thorough grasp of its meaning.’



Excellent summary of the errors in Fundamentalist Interpretation  
(PBC 1993, pages 72-75).

‘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’(1993, page 73).



## Origen De Principiis 4.2

‘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.’

## Jesus

‘Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’  
I have come to call not the righteous but sinners’(Matthew 9:13).

‘If you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’  
you would not have condemned the guiltless’(Matthew 12:7).



To read Scripture is to accept an invitation to prayer

‘God reveals himself ...  
to invite and receive into his own company’(DV 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’(DV 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’(DV 21).



Ephrem (4th century Syrian)  
Commentary on the Diatessaron I,18-19

‘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.’