

THE CATHOLIC APPROACH TO SCRIPTURE

I. The early Church decided what books are part of the Scriptures, and commentaries on Scripture became more and more common.

A. There was a debate in the early Church about what books, both before and after Christ, were to be considered inspired by God.

1. The Jewish faith did not settle what books they would consider canonical (i.e. a part of Scripture) until the discussions centered in Jamnia around 90-110 A.D. Believing that the time of Scripture had closed by 400 B.C., with the priesthood of Ezra and the writing of the last prophet Malachi, and believing that the word of God was first written in Hebrew, the Jewish leaders of the late first and second centuries excluded seven books that the Catholic Church accepts as canonical. These books are: Judith, Wisdom, Sirach, Tobit, Baruch, and 1 and 2 Maccabees, as well as the last 2 chapters of Daniel. That belief continues among Jews until today, and most Protestants follow the Jewish beliefs about the books of the Old Testament.

- Some books, such as the Book of Jubilees and 1 and 2 Enoch were considered but ultimately not accepted as canonical by either Christians or Jews.

- The first five books of the Old Testament, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, have always been accepted by all Christians and Jews.

2. In the early Church, there was some debate about what books should be considered canonical. There were several lists, such as the recently discovered Muratorian Canon, and the lists in works of Eusebius, the court historian of the Emperor Constantine in the early fourth century.

- Some books in the Bible, such as Hebrews and Revelation, were heavily debated, and other books not in the Bible such as the 1 and 2 Clement, the Didache, The Shepherd of Hermas and the Gospel of Peter (not written by St. Peter), were considered by some people to be inspired. See, e.g., Eusebius, Ecclesiastic History, Book III,

ch.3, 25; Book VI, ch. 25; New Jerome Biblical Commentary, ch. 66.

3. In the 370s Pope Damasus consulted St. Jerome regarding what books should be included in the Bible. After considering what the early Church fathers cited as canonical, and what New Testament books had an apostolic origin and were faithful to Christian teachings, they and other theologians settled on what we now revere as the Bible. St. Jerome would then publish the Vulgate, a translation of the Bible into Latin, then the language of the people in the western Roman Empire.
  4. In 393, a synod of the African bishops led by St. Augustine and meeting in Carthage published the same list of books as the complete Bible. Pope Innocent gave his approval in 405. This Church has continued to use this list of books ever since. After the Old Testament list was challenged by the Protestants in the sixteenth, the Council of Trent affirmed in 1546 that the books in Jerome's Vulgate are the complete canon of Scripture, no more and no less.
- B. Early commentaries on Scripture were frequently in the form of lengthy homilies, which would develop passages at great length. St. Augustine's homilies on the Psalms and his extensive commentaries on the first three chapters of Genesis are classic examples.
- C. Early on, there developed two large schools of Scriptural interpretation, the Antiochian and the Alexandrian, named after two of the great cities of the classical world.
1. The Antiochian school, led by such figures as St. Ephraim and St. John Chrysostom, emphasized the literal interpretation of Scripture, although certainly with moral applications to the present. They focused heavily on the doctrinal implications of Scriptural texts, such as the moral law and the relationship between grace and nature.

2. The Alexandrian school, led by such figures as Origen and St. Clement of Alexandria, emphasized the spiritual meaning of Scripture. Thus, for example, they would describe the Chosen People's journey to the Promised Land as an allegory for our spiritual journey, or the parable of the Good Samaritan as an allegory for Christ's saving us from the robbers of our soul. Following the pattern of the Letter to the Hebrews, they heavily used typology, presenting Old Testament figures as types, or prefigurements, of Christ and the Gospels.

II. In the Middle Ages, theologians developed a four-fold method of interpreting Scriptures and strove to combine faith with reason, especially in the Scholastic tradition.

A. Theologians would say that there are four basic levels of meaning to a Scriptural text, the literal, the allegorical, the moral, and the anagogical (or eschatological, heavenly) sense. See, e.g., St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica Book I, question 1, article 10.

1. The literal sense is the sense expressed by the words themselves, as meant by the author for the audience he was writing and, by extension, to others. This sense may itself be allegorical, for the author may have intended allegory, as in the case of the visions of Daniel and Revelation, the parables of Jesus, and much of the first 11 chapters of Genesis.

- The literal sense must be distinguished from the literalistic sense, that is, only the superficial meaning of the words. The literal sense may have a figurative meaning, as in "White House" meaning the Executive Branch of the federal government or "Wall Street" meaning the financial community.

2. The allegorical sense is the sense of Scripture at a deeper level as applied to Christ, and by extension, to His Church.

3. The moral sense is the moral lessons of a passage and application to an individual person.

4. The eschatological sense is the meaning as applied to our final destiny, our journey to heaven.

5. Two common examples are the images of Adam and Eve and of Jerusalem.

a. Literally, the account of Adam and Eve (although in symbolic language) is about an event in human history, the Fall and resulting original sin. Allegorically, St. Paul presents it as the reverse of Christ's redemption. See, e.g., Rom. 5:12-17. Morally, it is an allegory of sin and the resulting shame in general. The anagogical meaning presents heaven as a final Eden, which Satan attacks in vain.

b. Jerusalem is literally a city in the Holy Land and capital of Israel. Allegorically, it is an image of the Church. See, e.g., Catechism 756. Morally, it is an image of each human soul, in which God wishes to dwell. Anagogically, its perfection is an image of heaven. See Rev. 21:2, 9-27.

6. The Catechism expressly endorses this four-fold approach to Scripture, while emphasizing that all of the senses must be built upon the literal sense. See Catechism 115-119.

B. With the rediscovery of many of Aristotle's works, and the flourishing of philosophy and universities, as well as the beginning of modern science in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, much new learning came in and questions arose again about the relationship of faith and reason.

1. The Scholastics insisted that there can be no final conflict between faith and reason. Any apparent conflict can be resolved, like any apparent conflict between passages of the Bible. Furthermore, while faith is higher than reason, reason can help develop the implications of faith. See, e.g., Summa Theologica part I, question I, article 8.

- Even regarding matters accessible to reason (e.g., the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, the natural moral law), the scholastics maintained that Revelation is often needed so that these conclusions can more easily and without error. See, e.g., Summa Theologica Part II-II, question 2, article 4.

2. The Scholastics also recognized the need for Church teachings so that the things stated in Scripture that could be ambiguous or difficult, are made plain. See Summa Theologica Part II-II, question 1, article 9.

3. The Scholastic method would put together two seemingly contradictory passages of Scripture, or from faith and reason, and ask how they can be resolved. For example, Romans says that man is saved by faith and not works, but the letter of James says that he needs works to be saved. Compare Rom. 4:1-12; James 2:14-26. One resolution is that God gives man saving faith, but man must act in a fashion befitting that faith in order to keep it. Or, as St. Thomas asks, does God give us faith directly, or is it caused by forces in this world, or by our own decision. Compare Rom. 10:17, John 4:53 and John 3:21 with Eph. 2:8-9. St. Thomas argues that, in general, there is usually an external cause for faith, but also God's grace which enables us to take advantage of that opportunity. See Summa Theologica Part II-II question 6, article 1.

III. In the era of the Renaissance and the Reformation, the Church had to respond to challenges to her authority, while being open to legitimate advances.

A. Starting in the fifteenth century, with an increase in literacy and the development of the printing press, many more people were reading Scriptures. There was also an increasing study in ancient languages, especially Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic, making a deeper analysis of the Scriptures possible.

1. These advances could help people understand the Scriptures more, but there were also difficulties in the indiscriminate use of the methods of science to replace faith.

2. The deeper study of languages led to new translations of the Bible even into Latin. Furthermore, there was an increasing demand for translations into vernacular languages.

B. The early Protestants rejected seven books of the Old Testament as non-canonical. Furthermore, different translations of the Bible could lead to very different results.

C. Among the first issues the Council of Trent took up was Sacred Scriptures. In 1546, it published its Decree and Canons on Sacred Scripture.

1. The Council first reaffirmed that the Scriptures are the word of God, written with the Holy Spirit as one of the authors.
2. The Council then listed once again the 73 books of Scripture in the Vulgate as the authentic Bible, defining the Vulgate to be the authoritative translation, correct on every matter of faith or morals.
3. To deal with the issue of translations, the Council insisted that every translation of the Bible be approved by ecclesiastical authorities.

IV. As the so-called Enlightenment era spread in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Church was confronted with other challenges, both from those who rejected the inerrancy of Scriptures and those who would adopt a more pietistic approach now associated with fundamentalism.

A. In the eighteenth century, geological evidence was beginning to indicate that the world was at least some millions of years old. Furthermore, fossil evidence was beginning to indicate that species had lived and died out long ago. Alone, these discoveries were not a problem for the Church, for many exegetes had read the creation accounts of Genesis in a metaphorical fashion. However, many people tried to pit science and philosophy against religion. These attempts reached a height with Darwin's theory of natural selection; the theory itself did not contradict the faith, but many implications, such as the idea that man is nothing but an advanced ape, do.

B. In religion, many Christians, exemplified by the Lutheran theologian Rudolf Bultmann, began to say that Scriptures may be inspired, but were erroneous in many details. They said that we have to get beyond the factual assertions to the realm of faith.

- Many people, both liberal Protestants and non-Christians tried to downplay everything supernatural in the Bible.

C. The First Vatican Council, called in 1870, issued two decrees, one of which was on faith and reason.

1. In chapter II, on Revelation, it endorsed the Scholastic notion that Revelation is entirely true, as intended by the author, and reveals both things we could not naturally know by reason alone, and others things accessible to reason,

but so important to our salvation that God wanted to confirm them. It affirmed that the Holy Spirit is the author of all of Scripture and that, therefore, there can be no admixture of error. It also affirmed that humans using their own industry were also authors of Scripture.

2. The Council affirmed the Church's authority to interpret Scripture definitively. But it also confirmed that the books of the Bible were inspired and inerrant when written, as opposed to the view that the Church's approval is what made them valuable. The Council was confirming that the Bible is not simply a collection of good writings that the Holy Spirit guided the Church to use, but rather was inspired by God from the beginning.

D. In 1893, Pope Leo XIII took on both rationalism, which would reject all things that cannot be established by reason alone, and pietism, which would reject the role of reason in interpreting Scriptures in his encyclical Providentissimus Deus, On the Study of Scriptures.

1. Pope Leo XIII began by ringingly endorsing efforts to study Scripture and make it more available to the public, but also warning about those who would "defile or corrupt it."

- He said that knowing Scripture is necessary to know the truths of the faith, and essential for oratory regarding the faith. He began a long tradition in the Church of quoting St. Jerome, "Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ."

2. After reviewing briefly the history of Scriptural interpretation, he called for clerics and scriptural scholars to confront "our adversaries" who "defuse their deadly poison by means of books, pamphlets and newspapers." The deadly poison is the rationalist belief that would dismiss the Bible as the inspired word of God.

3. Recognizing the need for study of the Bible, against those who said that its meaning is always clear, he called for a careful preparation of clerics and scholars. In particular, he argued that the Church Fathers had great authority in interpreting the Bible and should be studied carefully.

4. He reiterated the need always to interpret Scripture with the "analogy of faith," that is in the context of Church teachings,

never contradicting them. Within the boundaries of Church teachings, he argued there remains a great deal of freedom.

5. Recognizing the legitimate advances of modern knowledge, he affirmed that greater knowledge of ancient languages and scientific history. But he criticized the excessive use of such studies as though Scripture could be critiqued like any other book.

a. He argued very strongly that there can never be any real conflict between faith and science, and that any apparent conflict is due to a misreading of one or the other.

b. In particular, he affirmed that, while Scripture deals with real historical events, the authors "did not seek to penetrate secrets of nature, but rather described and dealt with things in more or less figurative language, or in terms which were commonly used at the time."

6. He concluded by affirming strongly the inspiration and therefore inerrancy of all of Scripture, although granting that study is needed to understand the true meaning that the sacred authors were conveying.

B. On the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of Providentissimus Deus, Pope Pius XII published the next great encyclical letter on Scriptures, Divino Afflante Spiritu, in which he called for greater studies in Scripture and for care in understanding the literal sense and building upon it.

1. At this point, in the midst of World War II, Pope Pius was dealing with a different problem, namely, those who would defend the value of the Bible, but wanted to put a primarily "spiritual" meaning on it, avoiding the historical meaning.

2. Pope Pius XII began by reviewing the progress in studies that had occurred since Providentissimus Deus, including the founding of the Pontifical Biblical Commission and increase in Scriptural studies in seminaries and among the laity.

3. Given the new advancement in understanding of archeology, linguistics, and history, Pope Pius XII called for a great use of them. He also approved of the study of ancient texts to establish exactly what the ancient codices of the Bible



said and what the best translation of them would be. He argued that, when the Council of Trent said that the Vulgate was authoritative, it did not mean that there could be no improvements, but rather that it was very reliable and accurate on all matters of faith and moral.

4. Pope Pius XII then emphasized strongly that one should always begin reading Scripture by understanding the literal sense, meaning the sense that the author intended. He argued that other sciences should be used for this purpose so that the sacred texts may be more understandable. Like Pope Leo XIII, he emphasized that all interpretations must be consistent with Catholic teachings.
  
5. He then said that there are other spiritual senses that spring from the literal sense. The human author may not have known about these senses, but the Holy Spirit did, and thus the deeper senses are still a part of the Bible. But the Pope also warned about depending too heavily on "figurative" meanings from Scripture that have little to do with the plain meaning. He said that such meanings may be sometimes helpful, but are not as powerful as the word of God.
  - As with Leo XIII, he emphasized that one should especially consult the Church Fathers in deriving meanings from a text.
  
6. Pope Pius XII cautioned against getting too far afield with extraneous research so that people study about the Bible in an academic fashion, but do not draw forth the riches of the Bible itself. For Scriptures are "of themselves rich in original meaning; endowed with divine power, they have their own value; adorned with heavenly beauty, they radiate of themselves light and splendor" and offer to the intelligent "treasures of wisdom and prudence."
  
7. In speaking of the literal sense, Pope Pius XII drew even more attention to the fact that one must recognize the author's way of writing. As he said, "the ancient peoples of the East, in order to express their ideas, did not always employ those forms or kinds of speech that we use today." He praised efforts to understand ancient ways of writing in order to understand the Bible.

8. He recognized that there will be continual difficulties in understanding Scripture and in reconciling some different passages of the Bible, or aspects of the Bible with beliefs from other fields of knowledge. But he said that such difficulties are nothing new and are a motive for further studies. In particular, he cited St. Augustine in saying, "God wished difficulties to be scattered through the Sacred Books inspired by Him, in order that we might be urged to read and scrutinize them more carefully."

D. The Vatican II Council returned to the subject of the Bible in Dei Verbum, the Dogmatic Constitution on Revelation, one of its four central documents.

1. The document begins by emphasizing that there is one unified plan of salvation, manifested in God's saving actions, of which His Son's Incarnation, life, death, and Resurrection are the climax. God gave us Revelation to make this plan of salvation clear.

2. The Council emphasized a teaching that had been in the Church for centuries, but often in the background. In particular, it emphasized that Sacred Tradition is part of Revelation alongside of the Bible. This Sacred Tradition is the practices and traditions handed down from the Apostles throughout time, the "wealth [that] is poured into the practice and life of the Church." Examples of Sacred Tradition are the canon of books in the Bible, the roles of the clergy, and the structure of the Mass.

- The Council emphasized that the Magisterium of the Church can authentically interpret Revelation, but "is not above the word of God," instead at its service.

- Sacred Scripture, Sacred Tradition and the Magisterium make up what would come to be called the "tripod of truth."

3. The Council reaffirmed that all of the Bible, and each part, is the inspired word of God and thus without error. It said in a crucial line, "Since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly,

faithfully, and without error the truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of our salvation."

4. But the Council then emphasized that the inspired writers used various literary forms and thus one must understand the types of literature in the Bible to understand what the author was really asserting. Building on Pope Pius XII image, it said, "For the words of God, expressed in human language have been made like human discourse, just as the Word of the Eternal Father, when He took to Himself the flesh of human weakness, was in every way made like men."
5. Crucially, the Council reaffirmed three principles that must be used in interpreting the Bible.
  - a. First, one must focus on "the content and unity of the whole of Scripture." In other words, one part of the Bible should be interpreted in light of the rest, not in contradiction to it.
  - b. One should interpret the Bible in the context of "the living tradition of the whole Church."
  - c. Third, one should interpret the Bible consistently with the teachings of the Church, who has "the divine commission and ministry of guarding and interpreting the word of God."
6. The Council emphasized the unity of the Old and New Testament, saying that "the books of the Old Testament, with all their parts, caught up into the proclamation of the Gospel, acquire and show forth their full meaning in the New Testament and in turn shed light on it and explain it."
7. The Council affirmed that the whole of the New Testament "had an apostolic origin." Although parts of it were written by people other than Apostles (e.g. Luke and Mark) those authors were directly connected to the Apostles. The Council also affirmed the historicity of the Gospels, saying that "the four Gospels . . . , whose historical character the Church unhesitatingly asserts, faithfully hand on what Jesus Christ, while living among men really did

and taught for their eternal salvation." The Council did say that the words and deeds of Christ recorded in the Gospels are often a "synthesis," but an accurate one.

8. In the conclusion the Council called for a greater study of the word of God with a "constant vigor of renewal." For "in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the force and power of the word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons, the food of the soul, the pure and everlasting source of spiritual life."