

INSPIRATION

human authors. That is, they tend to interpret the words of the Bible at face value—literally rather than literally according to the type of writing used to grave misunderstandings, especially when the Bible is said to teach elements of science that are at variance with modern findings.

According to Catholic teaching on inspiration and inerrancy, the Bible does not make strictly scientific statements. Rather, when the writers of Scripture talk of the natural world, they speak either “figuratively” or “phenomenologically,” that is, according to the way things appear to the senses. References to the rising of the sun, for example, are not actual scientific assertions that insist the earth is stationary and the sun follows an ascending and descending course of motion. Such expressions are based on sense perception and common experience, and many are still in use today. Saint Augustine, whose view on this was endorsed in modern papal teaching, holds that Scripture was not written to tell us about “the essential nature of the things of the visible universe” (*Gen. Lit.* 9.20, quoted in both *Providentissimus Deus* §39 and *Divino Afflante Spiritu* §3). Thus, since the Bible makes no properly scientific assertions, it cannot be charged with teaching error on scientific matters.

Scripture, that is, God reveals himself and accomplishes our salvation through historical actions as well as through written and spoken words (see DV §2). The record of these events must necessarily be trustworthy and true or else the revelation of God would not be successfully communicated. Likewise, one cannot attempt to separate saving history from profane history in the Bible, for all events that appear in Scripture are providentially ordered to the goal of our salvation. For this reason, magisterial teachings have consistently taught that the Bible is inerrant in its presentation of historical events. Pope Benedict XVI, for example, censures those who deny that “the historical portions of Scripture do not rest on the absolute truth of the facts,” since those who hold this position are “out of harmony with the Church’s teaching” (*Spiritus Paraclitis* §6). The idea is that inspiration guarantees the factual accuracy of the historical statements of the Bible so long as a historiographical intent on the part of the author can be demonstrated.



language was mistranslated, or the interpreter has simply failed to understand its meaning (see *Letters* 82). Under no circumstances is it correct to claim that the Bible is in error.

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The effort to ascertain the meaning of the Bible intended by its divine and human authors. At one level, biblical interpretation makes use of historical and literary tools, for attention must be given to the historical context in which the biblical books were written as well as the literary conventions employed at the time of their composition. At another, biblical interpretation is a theological endeavor, which means the interpreter must be aware that God is speaking through the medium of human words and that often he intends a spiritual level of meaning that stretches beyond the horizon of the human writer’s intention. On both levels, authentic interpretation can take place only within the framework of the Church’s faith.

I. The Senses of Scripture

A. The Literal Sense

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II. Principles of Scriptural Interpretation

A. Criteria for Authentic Interpretation

B. The Church as Final Interpreter

I. THE SENSES OF SCRIPTURE

Catholic exegesis recognizes both a literal and a spiritual sense of Scripture. The literal sense is the meaning conveyed by the words of the Bible in accordance with the literary genre in which they were written. The spiritual sense is

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the meaning that God has invested, not in the words of the Bible per se, but in the historical realities that the words of the Bible describe. This spiritual meaning is subdivided into the allegorical sense, the moral or tropological sense, and the anagogical sense. A medieval couplet originating with Augustine of Dacia (d. 1282) offers a summary description of the four senses of Scripture and their respective spheres of reference:

*Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria,
Moralis quia agas, quo tendas anagogia.*

The letter teaches events, allegory what you should believe,
the moral meaning what you should do,
anagogy what you should aim for.

A. The Literal Sense

The literal sense is the foundational sense of Scripture; the spiritual senses presuppose it and are built upon it. It follows that the first priority of biblical interpretation must be to ascertain the literal meaning of its words. Theological scholarship has long maintained this perspective (e.g., Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* Ia.110), and in modern times the point was authoritatively restated by Pius XII: “Let the interpreters bear in mind that their foremost and greatest endeavor should be to discern and define clearly that sense of the biblical words which is called literal” (*Divino Afflante Spiritu* §23; cf. CCC 115–16).

That said, it is crucial to understand what this first step entails. It means interpreting the literal words of the text, but not necessarily in a literal way. In point of fact, the *literal* sense

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of Scripture is the *literary* sense of Scripture—the meaning of the author’s words as expressed through the literary form or device he chose to employ. Thus, careful study must be made of the literary genre in which the individual books of Scripture were written. Poetry must be read with the awareness that poetic language is largely figurative language. Parables must be read in accord with the purpose and techniques of parabolic teaching employed in ancient times. Apocalyptic texts must be read with a knowledge of how their graphic and sometimes bizarre symbolism is intended to be read. Historical narrative must be read according to the aim of the genre, namely, to relay historical information from the point of view of the historian. So, too, on a smaller scale, the interpreter must be familiar with the literary devices and idioms employed by the biblical writers. Metaphors should be read as metaphors, similes as similes, hyperboles as hyperboles, and so forth. This approach to a discovery of the literal sense is summarized in the Vatican II document on divine revelation:

For truth is differently presented and expressed in various types of historical writings, in prophetic or poetic texts, or in other modes of speech. Furthermore, the interpreter must search for what meaning the sacred writers in his own historical situation and in accordance with the condition of his time and culture, intended to express and did in fact express with the help of literary forms that were in use during that time. Thus, to understand correctly what the sacred author wanted to assert, one must pay suitable attention both to the customary and character-

istic modes of perception, speech, and narrative that prevailed at the time of the sacred writer, and to the customs that people of that time generally followed in their dealings with one another. (DV §12)

B. The Spiritual Sense

The spiritual sense is that meaning which God, who is the author of history as well as the biblical texts, expresses through the historical realities and events spoken about in the Bible. Classically understood, the spiritual sense is not an additional layer of meaning that is hidden within the words of Scripture. It consists rather of the mysteries of faith, life, and eternity that are symbolized by the historical persons, actions, and institutions showcased in the Bible. If literal exegesis deals with the written texts of Scripture, spiritual exegesis deals with all that is described by those texts.

From the earliest days of the Church, as seen in the New Testament itself, Christians have discerned a spiritual meaning in biblical history that goes beyond (but not against) the literal meaning of the biblical writings. Various expressions were used by ancient theologians to describe this nonliteral meaning, including allegorical, typological, or mystical meaning. In the Middle Ages, when spiritual interpretation was subjected to more systematic reflection, theologians came to delineate three spiritual senses (CCC 117–19). These were generally defined as follows:

1. The *allegorical sense* reveals the mystery of Christ and the New Covenant foreshadowed in the historical realities and institutions of the Old Covenant. This is discovered by reading the Old Testament in the light of the New

Testament, aware that all of Scripture has its fulfillment in Jesus Christ and the religion he established. The Trinity, the Church, the Mother of God, the sacraments—all such mysteries are seen in prefigurative form through allegorical reflection on biblical history. The allegorical sense promotes the theological virtue of faith.

2. The *moral or topological sense* reveals the pattern of Christian living foreshadowed in the OT and exemplified in the lives of Jesus and his disciples in the NT. The claim is that Scripture encourages virtue and discourages vice, not only by commandments and laws, but through topological reflection on the experiences of its many saints and sinners. The moral sense promotes the theological virtue of charity.

3. The *anagogical sense* reveals the heavenly and eschatological realities that await us beyond this life. Key aspects of biblical history are seen as earthly reflections of the greater realities of heaven for which we strive. Inasmuch as the anagogical sense leads us to contemplate eternal glory as our destiny, it promotes the theological virtue of hope.

Underlying the spiritual senses is the belief that Scripture is a unified book that presents God’s unified plan of salvation. Despite its numerous authors, its many phases of development, its variety of perspectives, and its division into two distinct Testaments, the texts of the Bible are held together around the saving purpose of God in history. Jesus Christ is the cornerstone that supports and unites the entire message of Scripture; for he is its whole

exegesis, the final and definitive revelation of God’s salvation to the world (CCC 128–30).

II. PRINCIPLES OF SCRIPTURAL INTERPRETATION

The Bible is unlike any other book, and so the principles that govern its interpretation must likewise be unique. Of course, being a monument of human history and industry, it is rightly studied as other human documents are studied. This means that interpreters can bring to the biblical text an array of tools and methodologies that are used in the study of ancient literature in general. Whether historical, linguistic, sociological, archaeological, or otherwise, the human dimension of Scripture is intrinsically open to this level of analysis.

But this is not what makes the Bible unique. Scripture stands in a class apart because it is a collection of writings inspired by God. Interpretation falls short of this divine dignity of Scripture when it fails to produce a properly theological exegesis that considers its message in relation to Christian faith and life. Scripture, as the Church has often told us, was written for our salvation and not merely for our information (see, e.g., DV §82–6). Hence, the Bible has its natural habitat not in the study or the library or the university, but in the life and liturgy of the pilgrim Church on earth. It is here that its message is received in faith, actualized in the disciplines of Christian living, and proclaimed to the world with zeal and conviction.

A. Criteria for Authentic Interpretation

The Bible thus has its home in the heart of the Church. It is primarily a gift from God above

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and only secondarily a monument of religious or cultural history. As such, we must bring to its sacred pages more than a collection of scientific tools and methods that can give us insight into the human circumstances that had an impact on the content and composition of the biblical texts. If its divine message is to be heard and received as God intends, we must bring our faith to the Bible along with the tools of reason. The one who reads or listens with faith opens himself to the voice of the Spirit who inspired and infused the Scriptures with its saving message. The Church encourages this when it declares: "Sacred Scripture must be read and interpreted in the light of the same Spirit by whom it was written" (DV §12).

What this means in practice is spelled out in the same sentence of the same Vatican II document. In addition to reading the Bible in light of the literary conventions in use in the biblical world, we are told that no less attention must be given to three interpretive criteria that place the Bible within the context of the Church's living faith (see DV §12 and CCC 112-14). These are delineated as follows:

1. *The content and unity of the whole of Scripture.* By this we are called to interpret the Bible as a unified book that reveals God's unified plan of salvation. The OT must not be isolated from the NT or set in opposition to the NT. Likewise, the NT must not be interpreted without reference to the OT upon which it builds. Thus, the context in which any passage of Scripture should be interpreted is the full canon of Biblical books.

2. *The living Tradition of the whole Church.* By this we are called to interpret the Bible with reference to the Church's ongoing efforts, stretching across centuries, to discern its authentic meaning. Account must be taken of liturgical tradition, of the theology and exegesis of the Church's doctors and saints, and of the authoritative pronouncements of popes and Church councils. Here the context of interpretation widens beyond the literary confines of the Bible and encompasses the Church's entire historical experience of reading and responding to the word of God.

3. *The analogy of faith.* By this we are called to interpret the Bible with reference to the Church's doctrines and creeds. Insofar as these communicate truths divinely revealed and definitively known, they establish limits on the interpretation of Scripture and thus serve as a safeguard against misinterpretation. More positively, the harmony and inner unity of the faith allows what is known to throw light on what is unknown or obscure. Here the context of interpretation is the sphere of all that the Church infallibly proclaims to be true.

B. *The Church as Final Interpreter*

At the end of the day, all efforts at interpreting the Bible should be placed at the service of the Church. The individual, whether a clergyman, a trained exegete, or simply a lay reader, is not endowed with a gift of infallible interpretation (cf. 2 Pet 1:20-21). The charism of infallibility belongs to the Magisterium of the Church, who is guided by the Spirit into the full truth of the gospel (cf. John 16:13) and stands as the

unshakable pillar of truth in the world (cf. 1 Tim 3:15). The Church, then, is final judge on the correct meaning of the Bible.

The point is not that the Church stands above the written Word of God. Rather, the Church is herself subject to the Scriptures and is entrusted with the task of safeguarding and proclaiming their message. Biblical scholarship contributes to this mission by helping the Church to make firmer and more informed judgments about the meaning of the biblical texts. The Church's role in biblical interpretation is succinctly expressed, once again, in the Vatican II document on divine revelation:

But the task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. Yet this Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God, but is its servant. It teaches only what has been handed on to it. At the divine command and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it listens to this devoutly, guards it with dedication and expounds it faithfully. (DV §10)

See also **Biblical criticism; Typology.**

IOIA The ninth letter of the Greek alphabet (ι), corresponding to the English letter *i*. It is the smallest mark in the Greek alphabet; in Matthew 5:18, Jesus says that "not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law," meaning that not even the smallest letter of the Torah would pass away until its fulfillment by the Messiah.

IRON

IRA The name of two men in the Old Testament.

1. One of the priests during the reign of David (2 Sam 20:23-26).

2. One of David's famed "Thirty" warriors (2 Sam 23:8-39; 1 Chr 11:10-47).

IRAD The son of **Enoch** and the father of **Mehujael**, and hence a descendant of **Cain** (Gen 4:18). In Gen 5:18, 19, an **Irād** is listed as a descendant of **Seth**.

IRJUAH (Hebrew, "the Lord sees") A sentry at the Benjamin Gate of Jerusalem. He arrested **Jeremiah** on suspicion that he was planning to desert to the Chaldeans (Jer 37:13-14). He refused to listen to **Jeremiah's** pleas of innocence, partly because **Jeremiah** advocated surrender (Jer 21:9).

IRON A metal that came into widespread use in the late second millennium B.C. when the so-called Iron Age began, although rudimentary forms of iron technology were known long before this. The first mention of ironmaking in Scripture is the reference to **Tubalcain**, a descendant of **Cain**: "he was the forger of all instruments of bronze and iron" (Gen 4:22). Iron was in use at the time of the conquest of Canaan, as attested in Josh 6:24 and 22:8. Later on, the Philistines protected the secrets of iron work and refused to permit the Israelites any ironsmiths on the assumption that thereby they would prevent them from forging iron weapons. Indeed, the Israelites were forced to bring their tools to the Philistines to be sharpened (1 Sam 13:19-20). The Canaanites likewise