

# A Brief History of Catholic Biblical Interpretation

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Over the centuries, the Bible has been interpreted differently by various people; the fundamental question, “What does the Bible mean?” has been approached in diverse ways. Through history, some people have assumed that the Bible means exactly what it says, no more and no less; it is to be read and understood at face value. At times the Bible has been read as an allegory, in which every person and event is thought to represent a deeper meaning. Sometimes the Bible has been given a typological interpretation, that is, earlier characters and events are seen as foreshadowings or “types” of later ones. Some people have consulted and interpreted the Bible strictly as instruction for a moral life; others have interpreted it solely in the light of prayerful reading and reflection. At times, different persons have attempted to combine various approaches in order to interpret the Bible, always seeking to answer the basic question, “What does it mean?”

One such prayerful mode, *lectio divina* (Latin for “sacred reading”), developed very early in the church and for more than a thousand years was probably the most important way of understanding and interpreting the Christian Scriptures. *Lectio divina* was particularly important in monasteries, as is evident in the sixth-century *Rule of Benedict*, which states that monks are to devote several hours a day to this sacred reading. *Lectio divina* combines reading, study, application to daily life, and prayer. Today, many individuals and groups are rediscovering this ancient way of interpreting and praying with the Bible.

## Development of Biblical Criticism

In the eleventh through sixteenth centuries, several educational and cultural developments in Christian Europe brought new questions to the Bible, opening the way for new modes of interpretation. Universities were founded, riches of other cultures were brought to bear on European thought, and rediscovery of ancient philosophies as well as growth of new ones influenced both the content of long-accepted ideas and modes of reflecting upon those ideas. Since the Church always exists within human culture, it was inevitable that these new winds blowing across Europe’s intellectual landscape would find their way into Christian thought as well. What is commonly called *biblical criticism* grew out of these centuries of change. It is important to be aware that the word *criticism* here does not have a negative connotation; it refers to critical thinking that poses the kinds of questions any rational person might ask about these ancient writings, questions such as: Was Noah actually six hundred years old at the time of the flood? How could Jonah survive for three days and nights in the belly of a huge fish? Why is the Lord’s Prayer not the same in Matthew and Luke? Biblical criticism then, as it developed and is used today, is a reasoned process of exploring a biblical book or passage in its historical, cultural, literary, and religious contexts in order to discover what the original author meant to communicate to the original audience.

Most biblical scholars date the beginnings of biblical criticism to a French priest, Richard Simon, who produced a lengthy study of the Old Testament ca. 1650. One element of the priest’s work that drew particular attention was his view of authorship of the Pentateuch. Simon proposed that Moses was not, as Christians had assumed for centuries, the single author of these five books. There was a great deal of



negative reaction to Simon's ideas, which were considered shocking to many at the time. His work was even placed on the Catholic Index of Forbidden Books in 1682.

Others, however, took up Simon's ideas and continued to ask questions of the Bible that had not been asked before. In the eighteenth century, other European scholars applied language studies and historical investigation to the Bible. Jean d'Astruc, ca. 1750, suggested that two different names for God (*Elohim* and *Yahweh*) used in Genesis indicated two distinct sources for this first book of the Old Testament. The further work of Hermann Gunkel provided a transition from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century. Later called the "father of form criticism," Gunkel identified various distinct oral forms within the biblical books, each with its own particular usage and intended meaning.

In the late 1870s, Julius Wellhausen offered a theory that is widely accepted today. From his study of the Pentateuch, he concluded that these five books represent a combination of four earlier written sources, codenamed J, E, D, and P (further explained below). Wellhausen's proposal further threatened the traditional view that Moses was the sole author of the five books of the Pentateuch. Some Protestant scholars were uncomfortable with this idea, and many Catholics felt even more threatened. Other long-held teachings and practices were under attack at the time, and so Catholic scholars tended to repeat and emphasize traditional views. Nevertheless, study of the Bible through various methods of historical, linguistic, and literary analysis continued, but Protestant scholars were more active in biblical study using critical approaches than were Catholics.

## Changing Catholic Response to Biblical Criticism

Near the end of the nineteenth century, Catholic resistance to critical analysis and interpretation of the Bible was reinforced at the highest level of authority. Fascination with human influence on the composition of biblical books had led some scholars to claim that divine inspiration had nothing to do with the formation of Scripture. For the pope at that time, such claims offered ample reason for suspicion of the new, modern methods of biblical study. In 1893, Pope Leo XIII published an encyclical (a publicly circulated letter), "On the Study of Holy Scripture" (*Providentissimus Deus*), warning that the new modes of biblical interpretation could easily undermine Catholic faith. In effect, the pope's letter discouraged Catholic biblical scholars from using the "new criticism," and so Catholic scholars produced few critical studies of the Bible in the early twentieth century.

Just fifty years after Pope Leo's letter, however, Pope Pius XII published the encyclical "On the Most Opportune Way to Promote Biblical Studies" (*Divino Afflante Spiritu*). His 1943 letter pointed out that conditions of biblical studies and the sciences that support them had changed greatly in fifty years. Using a different approach from that of Pope Leo, Pius XII encouraged study of the biblical languages, historical and cultural background, and the many forms of literature found in the Bible. At this time, however, most people were far more preoccupied with World War II than with the world of biblical scholarship. Therefore, Catholics did not make a great deal of progress in modern approaches to biblical study for another two decades.

Catholic scholars were not, however, completely idle. In 1964, the Pontifical Biblical Commission, an international committee of Bible scholars appointed by the pope, published the statement "On the Historical Truth of the Gospels." This document recognized that the canonical Gospels are not objective history containing only factual events written down exactly as they happened; rather, they represent three distinct stages of time and thought development. The first, earliest stage is that of Jesus himself, who used concepts and language of his own day and his Jewish culture. The second stage is that of the apostles, who after the Resurrection began to deepen their understanding of Jesus as divine, and so reinterpreted his earthly life in light of this belief. The third stage or level comes from the Gospel writers (evangelists)



who collected and edited oral and written traditions circulating in various Christian communities. Each evangelist selected certain elements from among these earlier sources, interpreting them in order to fit his particular audience and historical situation.

When “On the Historical Truth of the Gospels” was published, Vatican Council II, an ecumenical (worldwide) council of the Catholic Church, was already in session. In 1965, Vatican II released an important statement on the Bible in Catholic life, the “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation” (*Dei Verbum*). In this document, the council’s bishops emphasized sacred Scripture, along with tradition, as the essential source of all Christian theology, the “study of God.” They also strongly promoted the use of modern biblical criticism, paired with prayerful reflection, to interpret the Scriptures. Within about seventy years, the Catholic position on biblical criticism had shifted completely, from emphatic rejection of this approach to strong support for its use.

## Differing Protestant Responses to Biblical Criticism

As has already been stated, many Protestant biblical scholars embraced biblical criticism before Catholic interpreters did so. Not all Protestants, however, agreed with such methods of interpreting the foundational writings of Christian faith. At the American Biblical Congress of 1895, a group of Protestants from various denominations, dissatisfied with several trends in their churches, defined and claimed for themselves “five points of fundamentalism.” The first point, concerning interpretation of the Bible, insists upon “word-for-word inerrancy of the Bible, including details of historical and ‘scientific’ events.” In other words, Christian fundamentalism took the position that it is unnecessary and irrelevant to inquire about the historical, cultural, literary, or religious context of any part of the Bible in a search for meaning. The Bible means what it says and is totally true (or “inerrant”) on all counts. A relatively recent development in Christian history, biblical fundamentalism resoundingly rejects biblical criticism and its conclusions.

It would be easy to think that the claim of “word-for-word inerrancy” means that fundamentalists read the Bible absolutely literally, taking every word completely at face value. The fact is that no Christian interprets the Bible that literally; if this were the case, women would never be allowed to pray with uncovered heads, death would be the normal penalty for adultery, and many Christians would have their right hands cut off (1 Cor 11:4–8; Lev 20:10; Matt 5:30). In fact fundamentalists often read the Bible contextually, not literally, even in regard to matters of science, although they often fail to recognize that they are doing so. For example, very few fundamentalists would claim that the many biblical references to the sun “rising” or “setting” rule out a modern, scientific view of the earth orbiting the sun.

By the early twentieth century, fundamentalists agreed upon the five major points listed below:

1. Divinely inspired Scriptures with word-for-word inerrancy on all counts
2. Virgin birth and divinity of Christ [note that there is no mention of humanity]
3. Christ atoned for sin by substituting himself for all sinners in his death on the cross
4. Christ’s bodily Resurrection
5. Authenticity of Christ’s miracles or the Second Coming of Christ; lists vary



Most fundamentalists have embraced an approach to biblical interpretation called *dispensationalism*, which originated with John Darby (1800–1882) and was further developed and popularized by his student, Cyrus Scofield, in *The Scofield Reference Bible*, published in 1909. While this point of view has several subcategories, in general it envisions human history as a series of seven “dispensations” or periods of time; each stage is characterized by a particular way in which God rules the world and tests human obedience to the divine will. Each time humans fail the test, and God begins a new dispensation by offering another chance. The first four dispensations are related to the book of Genesis; the three last and most important are called the dispensation of law, spanning the time from Moses to Christ; the dispensation of grace, from the death of Christ to the present; and finally the millennium or “kingdom age,” associated with the second coming of Christ.

Because the death of Jesus is understood to end the dispensation of sin and death and begin the present dispensation of grace, biblical material that appears after the crucifixion accounts is considered most relevant for the present time. For this reason dispensationalists tend to focus on the New Testament letters, especially those of Paul, and Revelation. From this perspective, those parts of the Gospels devoted to the life, teaching, and earthly activity of Jesus are less relevant because they predate the dispensation of grace. Though there are some variations among dispensationalists, they share a fundamental conviction that from the death of Jesus onward, the clock is ticking toward the end of the world, which they expect to arrive soon.

Dispensationalists are sub-divided into pre- and post-millennialists, depending on whether they believe the second coming of Christ will come before or after the expected thousand-year reign of faithful Christians on earth. Pre-millennial dispensationalists envision that the world will end in fire, with Christ returning in full glory to bring the “rapture” of faithful Christians who will reign with him on earth for a thousand years. After the rapture will come a seven-year period of “tribulation,” during which people will have one more chance to accept grace and turn to Christ, which “the antichrist” will try to prevent. “Armageddon,” the final battle between good and evil, will end the current dispensation and begin the millennium (or “kingdom age”), the final dispensation. Most of these expectations are based on a dispensationalist interpretation of Revelation, the last book of the Bible. This reading of Scripture influences certain political views of those who believe it. For example, most dispensationalists consider the re-establishment of a Jewish state in 1948 as a sign of the nearing end of the world, so they firmly support the statehood of Israel and its military policies. Many also oppose nuclear disarmament, because their interpretation of Scripture indicates that the world will end in fire.

For several reasons, dispensationalism dominates Christian fundamentalism in the United States today. One major reason lies in the popularity of *The Scofield Reference Bible*, perhaps the best selling Protestant version of the Bible published in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century. In 1970, Hal Lindsey made dispensationalism widely available to the general public in his book *The Late, Great Planet Earth*, a vivid account of the planet’s “last days” that sold tens of millions of copies. More recently, the *Left Behind* series, novels portraying the same worldview and theology, has gained similar popularity.



## Inspiration and the Truth of the Bible

The above brief history of biblical criticism and various responses to it has indirectly referred to two important, related Christian claims about the Bible: that it is inspired and that it is true. At this point, additional clarification will aid further discussion. All Christians would claim that the Bible is inspired, that is, that these sacred Scriptures were produced by means of God's guidance. But several documents referred to above indicate that not all Christians have the same understanding of how God guided this process. Some Christians believe that God worked indirectly through the abilities as well as the limitations of those who passed on sacred traditions and those who ultimately composed the biblical books. These human authors clearly played a role in producing the final documents, selecting which material to include or exclude and deciding what kind of literature would best communicate intended meanings. Catholic biblical scholars often describe the inspired Scriptures as "the word of God in human language." On the other hand, some Christians understand God's inspiration as a much more direct divine guidance of the biblical author, almost a kind of divine dictation to a human person who played no real part in the writing. The LCMS document quoted above, for example, describes "verbal inspiration" to authors who "wrote only that which the Holy Spirit communicated to them."

Such contrasting views of inspiration, in turn, lead to different understandings of truth in the Bible. Again, there is agreement up to a point; virtually all Christians claim that the Bible can be relied upon as true, but true about what? Some Christians, primarily those who use the approaches of biblical criticism, believe that the truth of the Bible pertains only to what it reveals about the character of God and God's dealings with humankind. Those who hold this position recognize that the biblical authors thought and wrote in light of their own time and place, and so included notions of history, geography, and the physical universe that are not considered accurate in light of current knowledge. Thus they emphasize that the Bible is entirely reliable concerning "truth which God wanted to put into the sacred writings *for the sake of our salvation*" ("Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation" 11, emphasis added).

Other Christians, as seen above, believe that the Bible is true in all cases, on every subject. The LCMS document "Of the Holy Scriptures" explicitly states that God's direct inspiration ensures that the Bible contains no errors about anything whatsoever, including "historical, geographical, and other secular matters." Similarly, the first of the "Five Points of Fundamentalism" claims "word-for-word inerrancy of the Bible, including details of historical and 'scientific' events." In this view also, direct divine inspiration guarantees that the Bible is inerrant, literally true and without error, on all topics of every kind.

Just as Christians today interpret the Bible in numerous differing ways, precisely what Christians mean when they say that the Bible is inspired by God varies as well. The major distinction in approaches lies in whether one considers it necessary to interpret the Bible in the historical, literary, and theological context in which it was written. Between two contrasting approaches, contextual and non-contextual, a number of middle positions can be found, as outlined in the summary chart below.



## Major Differences in Approaches to the Bible

### **CONTEXTUAL**

**INSPIRATION:**  
God's guidance is indirect; makes use of human abilities and life situations;

therefore, Bible is word of God in human language;

as such, Bible is TRUE regarding God and God's dealings with humankind.

**MEANING** of the Bible therefore requires interpreting any text in its historical, literary, and religious contexts.

### **MIDDLE POSITIONS**

Broad range of variations;

some elements of context at times viewed as helpful, but

in matters of moral behavior, context usually does not affect **MEANING**.

### **NON-CONTEXTUAL**

**INSPIRATION:**  
God's guidance is direct communication to a human author,

therefore, the Bible is God's own word;

as such, the Bible is TRUE in all matters, on all subjects.

**MEANING** of the Bible is therefore immediately evident, and context is unnecessary for understanding.

## Contextual Approach to Interpretation

As the name implies, a contextual approach to interpreting the Bible insists that a text must always be interpreted in its context. The context includes all the circumstances surrounding a text that can affect its meaning. Those who interpret the Bible contextually examine historical, literary, and theological aspects of context, which usually overlap and so affect one another. An overview of these major aspects of context follows, with some of the important questions any interpreter of the Bible needs to explore in order to understand the author's intended meanings for the original audience.

To understand the historical context of any biblical text, one inquires about the time and place and social/cultural circumstances in which a book was written, as well as the particular audience to whom the book was originally addressed. If there is a long history of oral and written transmission, the interpreter also examines the historical situation in which particular traditions formed. Events and circumstances of the time in which a book is composed normally influence what content is included or excluded, which ideas and themes receive major emphasis, and so on. For example, in modern times a book about the 1968



assassination of Rev. Martin Luther King written within a year of his death could not possibly have the same perspective as a book written today, when the civil rights movement is more advanced and Americans have a much greater understanding of the role that Dr. King played in that movement.

Theological context might involve theological perspectives, questions, or struggles of the time and place of writing, especially issues that affected the originally intended audience. This aspect of context also includes theological points that the author intends to present or perhaps question, or both. The Gospel of Matthew, for example, is addressed to a Christian community of converted Jews who were searching for the connections and disconnections between the Jewish religion they had previously followed and their new faith founded on Jesus. As a result, the author strongly emphasizes how Jesus fulfills the Hebrew Scriptures, reassuring his Jewish Christian audience that they are not completely disconnected from their former religious way of life.

By investigating the literary context of any part of the Bible, interpreters recognize the fact that though it is a literature of faith, the Bible is still literature and therefore uses the types and forms of writing of the times and cultures in which these books were written. Interpretation greatly benefits from knowledge of the literary genre of a biblical book or any particular part of it, and the purpose or intention of that kind of literature. For example, a reader who understands that a particular book of the Bible is poetry will not read it like a historical report. One who realizes that a particular text is fiction will search for the intended point or meaning, not verifiable facts. Interpreting a biblical text in its literary context also involves analysis of structure, plot, characters, translation, and the like. In some cases, a biblical text might be compared to other similar literature, in order to understand better the thought and ways of expressing meaning of the time and place in which the book was composed.

## Catholic Interpretation of Scripture Today

As discussed above, several Catholic teaching documents indicate a major shift within recent times from non-contextual to contextual approaches to the Bible. In recent decades, two significant statements were published in order to clarify and elaborate Catholic teaching on two important matters: the most suitable modes of interpreting sacred Scripture, and the central position the Bible holds in the life of the Church and each of its members. (In referring to these documents below, number/letter notations refer to paragraphs or sections.)

### Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*), 1965

The first of these documents presents the consensus of all the Catholic bishops of the world who gathered for Vatican Council II in the early 1960s. On November 8, 1965, the council published its “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation” (*Dei Verbum*). Repeatedly the bishops clarified and promoted a contextual reading of Scripture. *Dei Verbum* describes inspiration as God’s action in and through the biblical writers, and so it follows that these writings “must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted to put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation” (11). However, the document continues, since God speaks through human beings “in human fashion, the interpreter of Sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words” (12).

To discover these intended meanings, interpreters are encouraged to work with the best translations from manuscripts written in the Bible’s original languages. Further, readers need to consider the historical and cultural context of the Bible and the literary forms it employs: “For truth is set forth and expressed



differently in texts which are variously historical, prophetic, poetic, or other forms of discourse, [and] due attention must be paid to the customary and characteristic styles of feeling, speaking and narrating which prevailed at the time of the sacred writer" (12).

In its comments on New Testament interpretation, *Dei Verbum* includes several ideas that had been published in 1964 by the Pontifical Biblical Commission. Both documents recognize three layers of material in the Gospels: that which comes from Jesus himself, interpretations of the earliest apostles, and the message that each Gospel writer wished to communicate to his particular audience. "The sacred authors wrote the four gospels, selecting some things from the many which had been handed on by word of mouth or in writing, reducing some of them to a synthesis, explaining some things in view of the situation of their churches, . . . but always in such fashion that they told us the honest truth about Jesus" (19). Finally, interpreters are reminded to seek understanding of a particular biblical text in light of the whole of Scripture and the Church's ongoing, living tradition. Catholics understand tradition as all that helps the community to grow in faith, as it is handed on not only in Scripture but in the shared life, worship, and teaching of the Catholic Church.

Following these guidelines for interpretation, the Vatican II document addresses the role of Scripture in the life of the Church. The council repeatedly underscores the importance of God's guiding presence for accurate understanding, urging that "prayer should accompany the reading of Sacred Scripture" (25). Catholics will be aided by reflecting on the Bible in light of their own spiritual experience and the teaching authority of the Church's bishops, which "is not above the word of God but serves it" (10). All of the Church's "theology rests on the written word of God, together with sacred tradition, as its primary and perpetual foundation" (24), and the Bible ought to shape all preaching and catechetical instruction. Therefore, the bishops strongly recommend frequent prayerful reading of Scripture for "all the Christian faithful," since "ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ" (25), and that "easy access to Sacred Scripture should be provided for all" (22).

## **"The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," 1993**

Nearly three decades after Vatican Council II, many Catholic preachers and teachers noticed that much of the council's teaching that promoted a contextual reading of Scripture had not reached or affected many Catholics, who seemed to be influenced by biblical fundamentalism and other non-contextual modes of interpretation. In response, the Pontifical Biblical Commission published "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church" in 1993, which contains one of the Catholic Church's strongest rejections of biblical fundamentalism. Repeating its critique of fundamentalist resistance to viewing the Bible as God's word in human language, the document states that this approach "injects into life a false certitude, for it unwittingly confuses the divine substance of the biblical message with what are in fact its human limitations." Such an emphatically non-contextual approach "often historicizes material which from the start never claimed to be historical" and fails to consider any "possibility of symbolic or figurative meaning" (I.F.).

"Interpretation of the Bible in the Church" further describes, analyzes, and evaluates several kinds of biblical criticism currently in use. On the one hand, the international committee of scholars again emphasizes the value of biblical criticism, often described as the historical-critical method of interpretation. On the other hand, the authors also reiterate that by itself this approach cannot reach truly theological understanding. In elaborating these points, the commission uses the ancient, traditional terminology of literal and spiritual senses of Scripture.

Since these terms have been used in different ways through Christian history, the commission first clarified the literal sense, stressing that it should "not be confused with the 'literalist' sense to which fundamentalists are attached." In other words, the literal sense is not at all the same as a literal reading that takes the words of the Bible at face value, without attention to their original context. Rather, the "literal





sense of scripture is that which has been expressed directly by the inspired human authors.” Note that this description again implies a kind of partnership between God and the human authors. As inspired, the literal sense is “intended by God,” but in order to discover meanings that the human authors communicated, interpreters must analyze texts in their own historical and literary settings. Strongly endorsing a contextual approach, the commission states that “one must reject as inauthentic every interpretation alien to the meaning expressed by the human authors in their written text,” for such interpretation is often carried out in “a wildly subjective” manner (II.B.1).

An example of the last point can be seen in the use of numbers in the Bible. The “beast” of Revelation 13:11–18, associated with the number 666, has been identified by various persons and groups as the Soviet Union, the United States, Russia, China, the pope, the Catholic Church, Protestantism, and Saddam Hussein, to name a few. But in order to understand the literal sense or “what was directly expressed by the human authors,” one would investigate how numbers were used in the author’s context, ca. 95 CE during a Roman persecution of Christians. First of all, at that time several numbers, especially seven and ten, commonly symbolized completion or perfection; further, all numbers were represented by letters of the alphabet. Revelation 13:18 says that 666 “stands for a person,” and the one most likely indicated by this number is the Roman Caesar Nero, whose name is a numerical equivalent of 666. A person who as 666 fell far short of perfection (777), Nero was the first Roman emperor to order the death of Christians, a “beastly” action repeated by some of his successors. With even a little knowledge of context, the literal sense, or what the biblical author expressed by the number 666, emerges, and other interpretations are seen as subjective meanings very different from that of the original writer.

Like Vatican II’s *Dei Verbum*, the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s “Interpretation of the Bible in the Church” insists that biblical criticism can assist readers to arrive at an accurate understanding of the Bible, but is insufficient by itself. The literal sense of Scripture must be integrated with the spiritual sense, the meaning that results from reading texts “under the influence of the Holy Spirit” and in the context of Christ’s life, death, and Resurrection and “the new life that flows from it.” Christian use of Psalm 2 offers an example of interpretation in the spiritual sense. In Psalm 2:7, God says to the king, “You are my son; today I have begotten you.” When the psalm was composed, Israelite kings were thought to be God’s agent; as such, the king was sometimes described as an adopted “son” of God. Christians, however, also apply this passage to Christ. When used in relation to Jesus Christ, the psalm takes on a deeper level of meaning, referring to him as not only an agent of God but as divine in his own being. As another caution against purely subjective interpretation, however devotional it might be, the document adds that “the spiritual sense can never be stripped of its connection with the literal sense” (II.B.2).

As is evident from the preceding brief survey, there is no single, universal Christian approach to interpreting the Bible. It is also apparent that how Christians set about determining what the Bible means has tremendous influence on the outcome of that process. At times an exasperated person seeking “the truth” of Scripture might ask, “Why don’t I get the same response when I ask different Christians what a particular passage of the Bible means?” The above review of various modes of biblical interpretation suggests at least one important answer to that question: while all Christians regard the Bible as the foundation of their faith, different Christians derive meaning from these Scriptures in many different ways.

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