

# Understanding the Scriptures



Author: Scott Hahn, Ph.D.  
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*The Bible is the written Word of God that reveals the living Word of God.*

# CHAPTER 1

## How to Approach the Bible

### OPENING ACTIVITY

Incorporate into the class's Opening Prayer the prologue to St. Luke's Gospel (cf. Lk 1:1-4). This passage introduces Luke's biography of Jesus Christ. Luke dedicates it to a man named Theophilus, which means "lover of God." Luke may mean a particular person named Theophilus, or he may mean everyone who loves God. If so, he has dedicated his Gospel to us, too.

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed. (Lk 1:1-4)

### BASIC QUESTIONS

This chapter attempts to answer the following Basic Questions:

- ✦ How does the Bible fit into the totality of Divine Revelation?
- ✦ What are inspiration, inerrancy, and infallibility in regard to the Scriptures?
- ✦ How is the Bible interpreted as literature?
- ✦ What is the sense in which passages of the Bible *must* be read and the other senses in which they *may* be read?
- ✦ What is the analogy of faith in regard to Sacred Scripture?

### INTRODUCTION

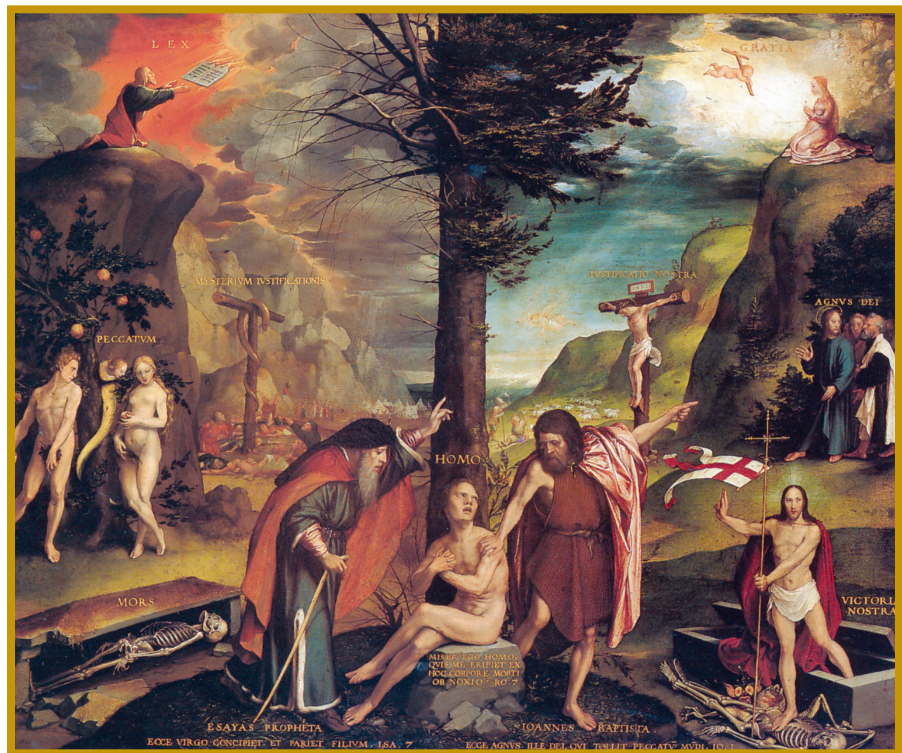
Everyone knows something about the Bible. We have all seen Bibles, heard Sacred Scripture proclaimed at Mass, or read part of it ourselves. We may even have studied it in class or in a youth-group meeting.

As Christians, we believe that Sacred Scripture is the Word of God. It is an essential part of "divine Revelation by which God comes to meet man" (CCC 26). It is part of the essential foundation of the Christian Faith itself.

In its seventy-three books, the Bible gives us the history of God's plan for our salvation, beginning with the creation of the world and ending with the establishment of the Church. Together, the many books of the Old and New Testaments tell one story:

*God created us perfect in the beginning, but our first parents, through their free will, sinned and brought death upon themselves and their descendants. Nevertheless, God promised a savior. God chose the people of Israel to lead all people back to him. God the Father completed this saving work in his Only-Begotten Son, Jesus Christ, and his sacrifice on the Cross. The end of the story is that good will triumph, evil will fail, and the People of God will live forever in paradise.*

In this text, we will explore more fully what Scripture is, how it came to be, how it should be read, and what it means for Christians today.



*Allegory of the Old and New Testaments by Holbein.*  
The many books of the Old and New Testaments tell one story.



*The Four Evangelists* by Jordaens.  
Inspired means God himself guided the Sacred Authors in writing the books of the Bible.

### WHAT CATHOLICS BELIEVE ABOUT THE BIBLE

**S**acred Scripture is a great way to learn more about Jesus Christ. As St. Jerome declared, “Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ.” If you want to feel at home in the Kingdom of God, then the Bible is your map. If you want to understand whom you receive in Holy Communion, then you need to understand how God was preparing his people for centuries before he finally gave us the Bread of Life in the Eucharist.

**All Sacred Scripture is but one book, and this one book is Christ, “because all divine Scripture speaks of Christ, and all divine Scripture is fulfilled in Christ.”<sup>1</sup> (CCC 134)**

We may have found by experience that while some parts of the Bible are easy to read and more familiar to us, such as the Gospels or some of the popular Bible stories, other parts are more difficult to read and understand. The language, cultural references, and storylines can be hard to follow, and sometimes what is taught or described seems a bit harsh or brutal to our ears. Some people find the God described in the New Testament to be considerably more loving and forgiving than the God described in the Old Testament, for example, and that can lead to confusion.

If we want to understand Scripture more fully, then we need to approach the Bible with the mind of the Church. To do this, we should consider three terms we use to describe the Bible: Scripture is *inspired*, *inerrant*, and *infallible*.

**Inspired** means God himself guided the Sacred Authors in writing the books of the Bible. The writers’ intellects were enlightened directly by the action of the Holy Spirit to write what God wanted and nothing more. Because of this, God is the principal Author of Scripture. He did not, however, dictate Scripture to its writers word for word. The human authors are true authors because they acted as free, subordinate, and intelligent instruments of the Holy Spirit who communicated God’s inspired truth in their own words using a variety of literary styles.

#### KEY IDEAS

The key ideas of this chapter are:

- ✦ The Bible is that part of Divine Revelation that has been put down in writing.
- ✦ The Bible is inspired by God, inerrant in teaching the truth, and is infallibly interpreted by the Magisterium of the Catholic Church.
- ✦ The Bible must be interpreted as ancient, religious literature according to the intention of the human and divine authors.
- ✦ Besides the literal sense in which every passage must be read, a passage of Scripture may also be interpreted in one of three spiritual senses: allegorical, moral, or anagogical.
- ✦ The Bible is best interpreted in light of the totality of the Faith.

#### GUIDED EXERCISE

Do a Paragraph Shrink on the passage beginning “God created us perfect.”

In a Paragraph Shrink you read the passage, identify the main idea and the most important supporting details, and then rewrite the passage in one or two sentences. In this case, try to summarize it in one sentence.

Compare results.

#### Focus Question 1:

Who is the fullness of Divine Revelation?

#### Focus Question 2:

What are the two main sources of our knowledge of Jesus Christ?

#### Focus Question 3:

What does the claim “ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ” mean?

#### Focus Question 4:

What does the inspiration of the books of the Bible mean?

#### Focus Question 5:

How many authors does each book of the Bible have?



### Focus Question 6:

What is the inerrancy of the Bible?

### Focus Question 7:

What is infallibility in reference to the Bible?

### VOCABULARY

#### MAGISTERIUM

The teaching authority of the Church which, guided by the Holy Spirit, interprets Scripture and Tradition.

#### INERRANT

Making no mistakes or errors. Scripture is inerrant; that is, it always teaches truth, never falsehood.

#### INFALLIBLE

Incapable of misleading or deceiving. The Bible and the teaching of the Church—when teaching on matters of faith or morals—are infallible because of a special protection by God.

#### INSPIRED

Guided by God. From a word meaning “breathed in.” The human writers of Scripture wrote in their own language, but through God’s inspiration they wrote what God intended them to write and nothing more.

### GUIDED EXERCISE

Conduct a Think/Pair/Share using the following question:

- ✦ In addition to reading the Bible, what are other valid ways of knowing Jesus Christ?



*St. Matthew the Evangelist by Rosales.*

A truth can be inspired by God and expressed without error but that does not mean we as individuals can interpret it without error.

**Inerrant** means that the Bible does not err. *Properly understood*, Scripture always teaches truth, never error. “Therefore, 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 that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings<sup>2</sup> for the sake of salvation” (DV 11).

Inspiration and inerrancy refer to that which is written in Scripture. The Sacred Scriptures are inspired by God and teach the truth.

**Infallible** also means inerrant, but refers particularly to correct interpretation. A truth can be inspired by God and expressed without error but that does not mean we as individuals can interpret it without error. That is why we state above that Scripture always teaches truth “properly understood.” It is truth when interpreted correctly.

The true interpretation of both Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition is expressed in the infallible teaching of the Church. “Infallible” means that, because of the divine guidance of the Holy Spirit himself, the Church cannot teach error in matters of faith and morals.

**In order to preserve the Church in the purity of the faith handed on by the apostles, Christ who is the Truth willed to confer on her a share in his own infallibility. By a “supernatural sense of faith” the People of God, under the guidance of the Church’s living Magisterium, “unfailingly adheres to this faith.”<sup>3</sup> (CCC 889)**

So when the Magisterium, the teaching authority of the Church, expresses a teaching and refers to Scripture, we can be sure it is teaching the truth of Scripture as intended by Christ.

### THE BIBLE IS SACRED LITERATURE

**T**he Bible is sacred literature because God is its Author. While his Revelation is given to us in human language, understanding it correctly requires some preparation.

The Bible is a collection of many works written by many different authors over thousands of years and in different languages. Those authors had different ways of thinking and writing. Some of them wrote beautiful poetry, as we find in the Psalms. Others, like St. Luke in his Gospel and his Acts of the Apostles, wrote detailed history based on accurate research. Some, like Ezekiel, had symbolic visions. Some simply recorded facts, like the catalog of the tribes of Israel listed in Numbers. Some books are written in a very simple style; others, like Ecclesiastes, are philosophical and intellectual. Just as with writers of other books, the personalities of the human authors come through in what they wrote.

**In Sacred Scripture, God speaks to man in a human way. To interpret Scripture correctly, the reader must be attentive to what the human authors truly wanted to affirm and to what God wanted to reveal to us by their words.<sup>4</sup> (CCC 109)**

The fact that the authors of Scripture wrote literature tells us they used literary forms and techniques to convey their meaning. There are many different genres of literature in the Bible, such as stories, poems, dialogues, and histories. The Sacred Authors also used many different literary techniques: metaphors, similes, parallelism, symbolism, personifications, and so on. Unless we understand how those forms and techniques work, we cannot understand the meaning that these inspired authors wanted to convey.

The Bible is also *ancient* literature. Even the most recent books of the New Testament are almost two thousand years old. The authors of Scripture did not write the same way modern authors write. To understand what they meant to say, we have to understand the way they saw the world.



*The Vision of Ezekiel (detail) by Raphael.*

There are many different genres of literature in the Bible, such as stories, poems, dialogues, and histories.

#### Focus Question 8:

Can individual Christians be in error in understanding the Bible?

#### Focus Question 9:

What are some of the genres in which the authors of the Bible wrote?

#### Focus Question 10:

What are some literary techniques the Sacred Authors employed?

#### GUIDED EXERCISE

Perform a Focused Reading of the three paragraphs beginning, "The Bible is a collection of many works," including the selections from CCC 109 and 110, using the following question:

- ✦ Why does the age of the Bible create special challenges in understanding the authors' intentions in the various books?

In a Focused Reading, you first read the Focus Question, then you read the passage, keeping the question in mind, then you return to the question and attempt to answer it.

Share findings.

*Even the most recent books of the New Testament are almost two thousand years old.*