

Understanding The Scriptures

A Complete Course On Bible Study



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Understanding The Scriptures

Chapter 1

What is the Bible?



Read

2 Timothy
3:10 - 4:5

1 Peter
1:12 - 2:22

The revelation of God in Jesus Christ is transmitted through Scripture and Tradition as one common source. The Tradition includes the Scriptures which are a privileged expression of the Tradition. "Sacred Scripture is the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit. And Tradition transmits in its entirety the Word of God which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit" (DV 9). The Word of God in written or oral form is interpreted authentically by the magisterium of the Church. Scripture—the Bible—has to be read and explained in the Church.

The Bible is the *inspired and inerrant* Word of God. In seventy-three books, it gives us the history of God's plan for our salvation, beginning with the creation of the world and ending with the beginnings of the Christian Church. Together with the teaching of the Church, the Bible tells us what we need to know in order to be saved.

Although the Bible is made up of many books, together those books 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. The rest of the Bible tells how God gave human beings the means to salvation. We learn how God chose the people of Israel to lead all people back to himself, and how God the Father completed that work in his only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, and his sacrifice on the Cross. Finally, we learn the truth about the end of history: good triumphs, evil fails, and the People of God live forever in paradise. That is the story of our faith.

Sacred Scripture is not the *only* authority for our faith, as Scripture itself tells us. The Church was founded by Jesus Christ to keep the *living Tradition* of the faith alive. As Catholics, we believe that the Church is not simply a religious institution that preserves tradition. At Pentecost, after the death and resurrection of Christ, God poured out the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles, and because of that gift, the Holy Spirit continues to dwell in and guide the Church. The teaching of the Church opens up all the riches of the Bible to us. Because we have the living truth of the Church, we can read Scripture with more confidence, more understanding, and more freedom.

Chapter 1: What is the Bible?

What Catholics Believe About The Bible

- **The inspired Word of God comes to us through Sacred Scripture.**
- **The living Word of God also comes to us equally through the living Tradition of the Church.**
- **The infallible Word of God as transmitted by Scripture and Tradition has been entrusted solely to the living Magisterium of the Church which exercises its authority in the name of Jesus Christ.**

Sacred Scripture is inspired and inerrant. “Inspired”—from a word meaning, “breathed in”—means that God himself guided the authors who wrote 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. This process took place over several thousand years. The Spirit moved them to write without in any way impairing their freedom to write what was in their intellects. Though God is the principal author of scripture, the human authors are also true authors because they acted as free, subordinate, intelligent instruments of the Holy Spirit.

“Inerrant” means that it does not err: properly understood, Scripture always teaches truth, never error. “Since, therefore, all that the inspired authors, or sacred writers, affirm should be regarded as affirmed 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 11).

Reading Sacred Scripture is, in a way, like receiving the Eucharist. In both cases, the Word of God comes directly to us. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (103) tells us that “the Church has always venerated the Scriptures as she venerates the Lord’s Body. She never ceases to present to the faithful the bread of life, taken from the one table of God’s Word and Christ’s Body.”

For the Catholic believer the Word of God alone is supreme. But the Scriptures are not the only source for God’s Word, as the Scriptures themselves will tell you.

In 2 Thessalonians 2:15, St. Paul reminds the Thessalonian believers that they must hold fast to the traditions that the apostles have passed down either in writing or by word of mouth. “So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter.” Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition form one source from which the Word of God comes to us, as the New Testament itself tells us.

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

The Great Qumran Isaiah Scroll, ca. 100 B.C., is the oldest complete manuscript of any book of the Bible. Remarkably similar to the standard Hebrew text, it provides overwhelming proof of the accuracy of the Book of Isaiah we read today.



Understanding The Scriptures

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” (LG 12; cf. DV 10). (CCC 889)

The mission of the Magisterium is linked to the definitive nature of the covenant established by God with his people in Christ. It is this Magisterium’s task to preserve God’s people from deviations and defections and to guarantee them the objective possibility of professing the true faith without error. Thus, the pastoral duty of the Magisterium is aimed at seeing to it that the People of God abides in the truth that liberates. To fulfill this service, Christ endowed the Church’s shepherds with the charism of infallibility in matters of faith and morals. The exercise of this charism takes several forms: (CCC 890)

“The Roman Pontiff, head of the college of bishops, enjoys this infallibility in virtue of his office, when, as supreme pastor and teacher of all the faithful—who confirms his brethren in the faith—he proclaims by a definitive act a doctrine pertaining to faith or morals... The infallibility promised to the Church is also present in the body of bishops when, together with Peter’s successor, they exercise the supreme Magisterium,” above all in an Ecumenical Council (LG 25; cf. Vatican Council I: DS 3074). When the Church through its supreme Magisterium proposes a doctrine “for belief as being divinely revealed” (DV 10 § 2), and as the teaching of Christ, the definitions “must be adhered to with the obedience of faith” (LG 25 § 2). This infallibility extends as far as the deposit of divine Revelation itself (cf. LG 25). (CCC 891)

Divine assistance is also given to the successors of the apostles, teaching in communion with the successor of Peter, and, in a particular way, to the bishop of Rome, pastor of the whole Church, when, without arriving at an infallible definition and without pronouncing in a “definitive manner,” they propose in the exercise of the ordinary Magisterium a teaching that leads to better understanding of Revelation in matters of faith and morals. To this ordinary teaching the faithful “are to adhere to it with religious assent” (LG 25) which, though distinct from the assent of faith, is nonetheless an extension of it. (CCC 892)

What does it mean to say the Bible is divinely inspired?



The Holy Spirit enlightened the intellects of many different specific authors over thousands of years so they could conceive all that which God wanted them to write and nothing more. Divine inspiration infallibly moved the will of each sacred author—without impairing his freedom in any way—to write what was in his intellect. Divine inspiration assisted the human author to use the correct language and expressions to describe what was being infallibly written.

This means God is the principal author of Scripture; the human authors are also true authors. These sacred authors were free, intelligent, subordinate instruments of the Holy Spirit. Because of this, each book of the Bible is inspired and can at the same time be called the work of God and of the human author. There is nothing in Scripture not inspired by God. “All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tm 3:16).

The Holy Spirit, principal author of the Bible, can guide human authors in the choice of expressions in such a way that the latter will express a truth the fullest depths of which the authors themselves do not perceive. This deeper truth will be more fully revealed in the course of time and discerned in the Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Chapter 1: What is the Bible?

Periods Of Bible History

The Old Testament Period – 4000 B.C. to 400 B.C.

The Inter-Testamental Period – 400 B.C. to 4 B.C.

The New Testament Period – The A.D. Period

4000 B.C. to 2120 B.C. The Primeval Period

2120 B.C. to 1900 B.C. The Patriarchal Period

1900 B.C. to 1400 B.C. The Egyptian Period

1400 B.C. to 1050 B.C. The Tribal Period

1050 B.C. to 900 B.C. The Davidic Period

900 B.C. to 600 B.C. The Assyrian Period

600 B.C. to 540 B.C. The Babylonian Period

540 B.C. to 330 B.C. The Persian Period

330 B.C. to 170 B.C. The Greek Period

170 B.C. to 70 B.C. The Maccabean Period

70 B.C. to 100 A.D. The Roman Period

The Gezer Calendar, a limestone tablet listing the agricultural year, is one of the oldest Hebrew inscriptions dating to the time of Solomon, late 11th to early 10th century B.C. The city of Gezer was given to Solomon by the Pharaoh of Egypt as part of the dowry for Solomon's marriage to an Egyptian princess. David had left Gezer unconquered out of respect for Egypt's claim to the city.

Because we have both Scripture and Tradition, interpreted for us by the Magisterium, the *Catechism* tells us (108), "The Christian faith is not a 'religion of the book.'" Instead, Christianity is a religion of the Word of God, and the Word of God—Jesus Christ—is still living today and will live forever.

But Scripture is the way we come to know who Jesus is. 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 Eucharistic Liturgy.

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" (Hugh of St. Victor, *De arca Noe* 2, 8: PL 176, 642: cf. *ibid.* 2, 9: PL 176, 642-643). (CCC 134)

"For the Word of God is living and active," says Hebrews 4:12, "sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." To live in a way that truly pleases Jesus Christ, we need to study—and meditate on—the Bible. That is the only way to get to know what Jesus Christ is like.