

How to Read Holy Scripture

Interpretation of Sacred Scripture and its Various Kinds of Meaning

Sacred Scripture is the Word of God addressed to us in written form, and like every document it is open to different interpretations. However, some interpretations of the Bible—whose text is particularly rich—go deeper than others, and not all the interpretations are equally valid. To interpret any written text properly one has to bear in mind a whole series of factors such as the nature of the document; the kind of person the author is and the ways in which he expresses himself; the context in which he is writing; and the setting in which the text is going to be read; etc.

In the case of the Bible, we are obviously dealing with religious writing whose ultimate author, as Jews (in respect of the Old Testament) and Christians believe, is God himself: God it was who inspired the writers of the various books. Therefore, correct interpretation of Sacred Scripture must necessarily be guided by the fact that one is dealing with texts inspired by God, texts in which God is using human language to address man.

This fact, the divine inspiration of Scripture, has decisive importance when it comes to interpreting the text. Firstly, being the Word of God, Scripture contains a richness of meaning which the human reader can never totally plumb. It can be said therefore to have a number of meanings or senses: as the rabbis of our Lord's time used say, it has seventy faces. Secondly, one must start off from the fact that since God, in Sacred Scripture, is speaking through men—the hagiographers or sacred writers who wrote the text—the first thing to look for is what the writer intended to convey by the words he set down. This meaning is what is known as the "literal" or historic sense; and it is this sense that we shall examine first.

THE LITERAL SENSE

Let us take a particular passage—for example, the one that deals with the Israelites crossing the Red Sea (cf. Ex 14:15f). What is the literal sense of this text? The Israelites, in their flight from the Egyptians, find their way blocked by the sea; then God works the great miracle of making a path of dry ground through the sea, and once they have crossed the waters return to normal, thereby preventing the Egyptians from continuing their pursuit, with the result that the Israelites are now safe. The literal sense of the passage is the facts as described by the words of the text.

This sense is divided into the "literal sense proper" and "literal sense improper", a distinction which applies to all types of literature. The literal sense proper obtains when the words are being used in their proper or precise meaning; the literal sense improper, when some sort of literary device is being used: when we say, for example, "the skies wept", we are not using the words in a strictly literal way; we are speaking metaphorically. Or, for example, when we speak of "drinking the cup", we are using the word for the container to mean in fact its contents. Figures of speech of this type are to be found in every language and they pose no problem of interpretation.

One has to bear in mind, also, that Sacred Scripture, like every literary work, is subject to the literary styles in vogue at the time of writing. For example, orientals are very fond of hyperbole, and therefore, when St John says that if everything Jesus did were to be written down, he doubts if the whole world

would be big enough to hold the books that would have to be written (cf. Jn 21:25), he is using hyperbole: he is exaggerating; he does not mean to, and should not, be taken literally.

So, we find in Sacred Scripture the whole range of styles and devices to be found in Hebrew and Greek literature--literary narrative, poetry, parable, hyperbole etc.

BEYOND THE LITERAL SENSE

In addition to knowing what the human authors intended to convey, one must also, in the case of the Bible, look for the meaning--what God intended the text to mean. To discover this meaning one needs to keep very much in mind "the content and unity of the whole of Scripture, the living Tradition of the entire Church and the analogy of faith"[1].

Because Sacred Scripture has dual authorship--a divine author and a human author--it has features not to be found in other books: we need to be aware of the possibility that even though a human author is guided by God, he may not be conscious of certain things which become much clearer years later, after other events of Revelation have taken place.

For the most part the authors of the Old Testament had an incomplete view of Revelation; in this sense they were different from New Testament authors. For example, the notion of the Messiah held by the Israelites of the sixth century B.C. was very primitive compared with that of the Evangelists. Yet when the Old Testament sacred writer speaks of the Messiah, saying things which he himself does not perfectly understand, God is using him to convey ideas which we--now that the salvific events have taken place--do see.

This is why the Church interprets certain passages of the Old Testament in a messianic sense; whereas it is very unlikely that the sacred writer himself realized the full import of what he was writing. So, when we come to the text, we may be inclined to ask: How is it possible to read more into the text than was put there by the human author of the book? The answer is that the words written by the hagiographer were open to taking on--later--a more profound meaning, yet one which was in some way already latent in them. This meaning is discovered in the light of the content of the whole of Sacred Scripture, just as the full meaning of something said in the first act of a play comes out only at the denouement. Some scholars call this meaning the "plenary sense".

THE PLENARY SENSE

According to the interpretation given by the Church to certain passages of the Old Testament, the existence of this plenary sense seems to be a teaching grounded in Sacred Scripture itself and one consistent with Catholic doctrine. Since God is the principal author of Sacred Scripture he can hint at a truth at a particular point in Revelation and later reveal it more fully, thereby lighting up the meaning of the earlier revelation. However, this meaning cannot be just something which an ingenious scholar turns up: it has to be something which Revelation itself (at a later stage) makes evident.

For example: in the Genesis 3 account of the first sin, God says to the serpent, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he [the descendant of the woman] shall bruise your head [a mortal wound], and you shall bruise his heel [a slight wound]." The sacred author could not have understood the full meaning of these mysterious words; God was referring, when he inspired the sacred writer, to a much later stage of salvation history. The interpretation of these words, which is given by the Church, sees them as containing the Messianic Prophecy; this descendant of the woman is pre-eminently Christ and secondarily the Virgin Mary. There was no need for the sacred writer to understand the full import of these words which he wrote under divine inspiration.

How does the Church arrive at the interpretation of a messianic passage? When the text was originally written, only God could know this dimension of the passage; the Church discovers the plenary sense of Scripture in the light of the subsequent events of Revelation, and with the help of things found in other passages of the Bible or in Sacred Tradition.

This occurs in the case of very many messianic prophecies; and therefore it is very likely that the prophets themselves did not see all the implications of what they were saying; we, however, can see them quite clearly because we have the benefit of the later Revelation, the benefit of hindsight; the authors of the New Testament, who had the charism of inspiration, have interpreted the Old Testament texts and thereby helped us to understand them.

THE TYPOLOGICAL SENSE: BIBLICAL "TYPES"

Another sense which lies behind the literal sense is the typological sense: things described in the text (and people and events reported) stand for other things--while at the same time having their own proper meaning. The word "type" means an image or figure or symbol which stands for something else. Thus the passover lamb of the Old Testament is the "type" or prefigurement of something which will later come to be: the lamb is the "type" of Christ, and Christ is the "antitype" of the lamb.

It is not for us to decide that something is the "type" of something else: this is something which is itself a matter of Revelation. In the particular case referred to, John the Baptist, as a prophet speaking under divine inspiration, states that the real Lamb of God was not the one sacrificed in the Old Testament; it is Christ.

Resort to the "typological" sense provides an explanation of a number of prophecies dealing with the suffering of the Servant of Yahweh; some of those, for example, speak of him as going like a lamb to the slaughter (cf. Is 53:7), etc. Christ accepts this as a description of himself, which shows that he is the Saviour who gives his life as a victim to atone for the sins of men and thereby bring them salvation.

The passage through the Red Sea is, in its typological sense, an especially clear assertion of God's desire for man's salvation. Thanks to this amazing event the people of Israel gained their freedom; in a similar way a person is saved by passing through the waters of Baptism. Thus, the waters of the Red Sea came to be seen as the "type" of the waters of Baptism that bring salvation.

Another outstanding Old Testament type is the ritual of the passover lamb (cf. Ex 12:1-28; Deut 16:1-8). Before the Israelites leave Egypt God commands all the Hebrew families to sacrifice a lamb, which they are to eat in a particular way and whose blood they are to smear on the door jambs and lintels of their

houses. The effect of this is that when the exterminating angel comes to punish the people of Egypt and sees the blood of the lamb on the doors of the Israelites' houses, he will pass by, pass over, and leave them untouched. Now, if we go to the beginning of St John's Gospel, we will find John the Baptist, when he sees Jesus approaching, saying, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world!" (Jn 1:29). Just as the passover lamb was sacrificed to save the Israelites, so Jesus will die to save the whole people (cf. Is 53:7): a typological or "typical" sense has been added to the literal sense of "passover lamb".

To sum up, the typical sense has to do with the way certain Old Testament events, people or things prefigure those of the New Testament. The waters of the Red Sea are a "type" of the waters of Christian Baptism; the passover lamb of the Old Testament is the "type" of Christ, who brings true Salvation and is the true Paschal Lamb (cf. 1 Cor 5:7).

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND READING THE BIBLE

The three senses mentioned above--literal, plenary and typological--are to be found in Sacred Scripture itself and provide us with the framework for interpreting it. The Second Vatican Council reminds us that "Sacred Scripture must be read and interpreted in the same Spirit by which it was written." [2] This ultimately means the Holy Spirit, for it was he who inspired the Old and New Testaments, who led the Apostles to understand the truth about Christ, and who moves and guides the Church to practise and to pass on this truth.

Christ and the Apostles, particularly in connection with interpretation of the Old Testament, teach us how to appreciate the profound meaning of the Bible. There is an episode in the life of Jesus, reported in St Luke's Gospel, which shows how Jesus interpreted the Old Testament; this passage establishes the basis of Christian teaching on the subject of interpretation. It reads: "And he came to Nazareth ... and went to the synagogue, as his custom was, on the sabbath day ... and there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah ... (and he) found the place where it is written, 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.' And he closed the book ... (and) he began to say to them, 'Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing'" (Lk 4:16-21).

The basic idea is that the Old Testament finds its fulfilment in Jesus. The fulness of time has come (cf. Jn 19:30). The prophecies and figures of the Old Testament are now seen to make sense (cf. Mt 1:22; 2:15; 4:14; etc.). So, the depth of meaning contained not only in the messianic prophecies but in the Law and in sacred history, cannot be grasped without Jesus Christ.

St Paul distinguishes between the letter and the spirit of Scripture (cf. 2 Cor 3:6; Rom 2:29). By the "letter" he meant the Old Testament as understood by the Jews prior to the fulness of Revelation in Jesus Christ; whereas the "spirit" meant Scripture as understood in the light of faith in Jesus Christ. The spirit, therefore, can only be perceived within the context of Christian faith. There, the Scriptures are once more "fulfilled" as the Holy Spirit opens the minds of the Apostles so that they can "understand the Scriptures".

Thus, Jesus and his Apostles gives us the permanent, fundamental principles of Christian exegesis: Christ is the key to Scripture; he provides the explanation both of the Old Testament, which announces the future Messiah, and of the New, which reveals him in the flesh. This principle applies prior to any

attempt to analyse the text: it must guide any such analysis, test whether a particular analysis is appropriate or not, and free the reader of the Bible from the exegetical short-sightedness to which sheer literalism leads. For interpretation of the Bible to be truly Christian, human reason and its tools (philosophy, history, philology etc.) must be imbued with and utilized by the Spirit, that is, by Christian faith.

TRADITION, THE MAGISTERIUM AND INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE

The Christian faith is grounded on apostolic Tradition, which includes the Apostles' preaching, the institutions which they gave to the Church, and the writings which they themselves, or contemporaries of theirs, were inspired by the Holy Spirit to write--the New Testament. This apostolic tradition "makes progression in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. There is a growth in insight into the words and institutions which are being handed on. This comes about through the contemplation and study of believers who ponder these things in their hearts (cf. Lk 2:19, 51), through the intimate sense of spiritual realities which they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received, along with the right of succession in the episcopate, the sure charism of truth." [3]

Thus it is that "Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture are bound closely together and communicate one with the other, flowing out of the same divine well-spring, forming one stream and moving towards the same goal." [4]

This is why the contemplation of Sacred Scripture is something which must always be done within the context of the Church's Tradition.

When a Christian is reading the Bible with a view to applying it to his own life, he needs to remember that "in the sacred books the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet his children and talks to them"; [5] but for any interpretation of Scripture to be correct it needs to be compatible with what is termed the "authentic" interpretation; it is for the Church, and the Church only, to provide this interpretation. The process, therefore, is as follows: the Church received the books of the Old Testament through our Lord Jesus Christ and his Apostles, and with the books their true meaning; within the bosom of the Church, God inspired further books, the New Testament; and, with the help of the Holy Spirit, the Church was able to establish which books were inspired and therefore fitted within the canon of Scripture. The Bible has been entrusted to the Church, for it to conserve, meditate upon and provide as spiritual nourishment to the faithful.

Because it is the Word of God, the treasures contained in the Bible are inexhaustible. To pass on and expound the faith, Christ endowed his Church with a special ministry, its teaching authority or Magisterium: "And his [Christ's] gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers" (Eph 4:11). What this means is that only the Magisterium--assisted by the Holy Spirit--has the role of authentically interpreting the Word of God. By divine command it "listens to this [the Word] devotedly, guards it with dedication, and expounds it faithfully." [6]

The Magisterium's interpretation of Sacred Scripture takes different forms. The most important of these is when it uses its full, Christ-given authority to propose truths of faith, to be held by all--as in the Creed,

which is a kind of summary of Sacred Scripture and the key to its correct interpretation. Any interpretation, therefore, which conflicts with the content of the Creed must be seen as faulty.

The second kind of interpretation occurs when the Magisterium in its ordinary, universal teaching uses the Bible to show that what it is saying is in line with the Word of God. This is its most common use of Scripture, as can be seen from the vast majority of the documents the Magisterium issues.

Finally, it uses Scripture when it goes out of its way to take issue with faulty interpretations of specific scriptural texts, particularly those which say that Jesus or the Apostles are referring to specific sacraments. When this does happen, it is incorrect to say that the Magisterium is curtailing individual freedom to interpret the Bible; all that it is doing is pointing out that the interpretation is in conflict with the true meaning of the text.

The Magisterium, moreover, particularly in recent centuries, has fostered and encouraged biblical studies, while providing guidelines for those working in that field.

Vatican II, Dei Verbum, 12.

Dei Verbum, 12.

Dei Verbum, 1.

Dei Verbum, 9.

Dei Verbum, 21.

Dei Verbum, 10.

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