

How to Read the Bible? – Catholic Approaches to Biblical Interpretation

The Challenge of “Fundamentalism”

- Five “Fundamentals” of (Protestant) Christian Doctrine (from the “Fundamentalist Congress” of the 1890’s)
 1. **Inerrancy of the Bible** (interpreted *literalistically*)
 2. Virgin birth & deity of Jesus
 3. Substitutionary atonement (Jesus’ death)
 4. Bodily resurrection of Jesus
 5. Imminent return of Jesus
- Popular Appeal of Fundamentalism
 - Offers *simplistic* answers to complex questions; people crave *certainty*, don’t like complexity or ambiguity

Five Principles of Catholic Biblical Interpretation

1. **Incarnational Principle of God’s Self-Revelation** (vs. bibliolatry, over-emphasis on Bible as text)
 - Multiple Stages of **Revelation**: essentially God’s *Self-Revelation* in and to the world
 - Also multiple stages of **Tradition**: the “transmission” or “handing down” of revelation
 - The **Word of God** is not just a book, but primarily **JESUS**, the Pinnacle of God’s Self-Revelation
 - “God sent his only begotten *Son*...” (John 3:16), *not* “...his only begotten book!”
 - **Incarnation**: “The Word became Flesh...” (John 1:14) → Jesus is *both* Son of God *and* Son of Mary
 - Word of God (God *speaks*, things happen); Word made Flesh (God speaks in limited *human* languages)
2. **“Both/And” Approach to Catholic/Christian Theology** (vs. one-sided over-emphases of any type)
 - The Bible is *both* the Word of God (divine inspiration) *and* written by human authors (language limitations)
 - The Bible contains *both* Old *and* New Testaments; we *both* study it academically *and* read it prayerfully
 - Catholics interpret the Bible *both* literally *and* spiritually (christologically, morally, anagogically)
 - *Caution*: We read the Bible *literally* (as “literature”), but not *literalistically* (as if it were mere “facts”)
3. **Ecclesial Guidance for Proper Understanding** (vs. individualistic misinterpretations)
 - Jesus, Spirit, Disciples, Church: all came *before* the Bible was completed and compiled!
 - The Church (guided by the Holy Spirit) created the Bible, *not* vice-versa!
 - The community helps us understand the text (Homilies, Commentaries, Bible Study, Scripture Sharing)
 - One’s personal/individual interpretation should not conflict with long-standing Church Tradition
 - Our Popes and Bishops are the guarantors of this Tradition (assisted by theologians and biblical scholars)
4. **Literary Genres are Diverse/Complex** (vs. modernist/historicist assumptions)
 - “GENRE” = category/type of literature (*art, music, etc.*) characterized by a particular form, style, or content. Some publications contain multiple genres:
 - Ex: **newspapers** have news, editorials, comics, sports results, financial reports, ads, obits, etc.
 - Similarly, the **Bible** is not just one “book,” but a whole “library,” containing many *different* literary genres:

Hebrew Bible Genres:

- **Myths & Legends** (Gen, parts of Exod, Num, Deut)
- **Legal Codes** (Lev, parts of Exod, Numb, Deut)
- **Genealogies** (parts of Genesis, much of Numbers)
- **Annals** (Josh, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, etc.)
- **Prophetic Books** (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, etc.)
- **Psalms/Odes/Songs** (Psalms); **Prayers/Laments** (Lam)
- **Proverbs** (Proverbs); **Wisdom Literature** (Job, Wisdom, etc.)
- **Apocalypse** (Daniel)

New Testament Genres:

- **Gospels** (Mark, Matthew, Luke, John)
- **Acts** (Acts of the Apostles)
- **Letters** (esp. Paul’s); **Epistles** (1 & 2 Peter)
- **Sermon** (Hebrews); **Wisdom Collection** (James)
- **Church Orders** (1 Timothy, Titus)
- **Testaments** (2 Timothy & 2 Peter)
- **Apocalypse** (Revelation to John)
- many more sub-genres, esp. in the Gospels

5. **Historical-Critical Exegesis is Essential** (vs. fundamentalist/literalist fallacies)
 - Foundation of **Ex-egesis** = “leading out” (drawing the intended meaning *out* of the text)
 - Contrast to *eis-egesis* = “leading into” (reading your own opinions *into* the text)
 - Catholics accept *many different methods* of exegesis: historical, literary, sociological, canonical, etc.
 - Multiple levels of **Content & Essential Role of Context**:
 - Literal/Historical Content (*original* meaning) *and* Spiritual/Theological Content (*enduring* meaning)
 - Literary/Canonical Context (surrounding *texts*) *and* Cultural/Historical Context (surrounding *world*)
 - Consideration of **Historical Development**:
 - From *oral* preaching/tradition to *written* texts/scriptures; growth in understanding/application over time

Official Church Documents explaining Catholic Bible Interpretation

- Pope Pius XII: *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (Encyclical, 1943)
- **Second Vatican Council: *Dei Verbum***: “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation” (1965)
- Pontifical Biblical Commission: “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church” (1993)
- ***Catechism of the Catholic Church***: Part One, Section One, Chapter Two - §§51-141 (1994, 1997)
- Pope Benedict XVI: *Verbum Domini*: “The Word of the Lord” (Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation, 2010)

How to Read the Bible? – Plans for Choosing Which Texts to Read

Canonical Approach:

- Reading the whole Bible *from beginning to end* (from the Book of *Genesis* to the Book of *Revelation*).
 - Reading thirty or more minutes each day, or one or more chapters each day, throughout the year.
- Various plans for reading the whole Bible in one or more years are available in print or online.
 - *Daily Scripture and Catechism Devotional* – 1-year plan, by the “Coming Home Network”
 - *How to Read the Bible Every Day: A Guide for Catholics* – 1-year, 2-year, 3-year plans; by Carmen Rojas
- This is probably *not* the best method, especially not for beginners, since the Old Testament (OT) is so long and many parts of it are quite difficult; you might give up long before you even get to the New Testament (NT).

Christo-centric Approach:

- Reading the Bible one book at a time, but focusing on Jesus and seeing the relation of all the books to Jesus.
 - Begin with one of the Gospels, for the basic story about Jesus (start with Mark, the oldest & shortest Gospel).
 - Then read some NT letters, followed by another Gospel; then the Acts of the Apostles, and more NT letters; then also some OT books, to learn about the history, culture, and theology of the Jewish people.
- You may want to read OT or NT books around the time when they occur in the *Lectionary for Mass* (see below).
- There are many good commentaries on each book or section of the Bible, to help guide your study and reflection:
 - *Collegetown Bible Commentary* and *New Collegetown Bible Commentary* series – by The Liturgical Press.
 - *Little Rock Scripture Study* – by the Diocese of Little Rock, Arkansas, and The Liturgical Press.
 - *Six Weeks with the Bible: Catholic Perspectives* – by Loyola Press.
 - *Paulist Bible Study Program* – by Paulist Press.

Thematic/Theological Approach:

- Reading portions of the Bible that are related to some theological, ethical, spiritual, liturgical, or other theme.
 - For example, reading texts related to Jesus’ resurrection, or to an issue of social justice, or to Mary, etc.
- Various booklets and guides for finding biblical texts related to certain themes are available in print or online.
 - *Threshold Bible Study* – thematic studies presented in short workbooks; from Twenty-third Publications.
 - *Scripture from Scratch* – short flyers appropriate as bulletin inserts; from St. Anthony Messenger Press.
 - *Interfaces* – a new series of short commentaries on certain biblical characters; from The Liturgical Press.

Liturgical/Lectionary Approach:

- Reading the short biblical selections that are used for daily and/or Sunday Mass, as found in the Lectionary.
 - Several Catholic publishers put out monthly booklets with the liturgical readings, along with commentaries, prayers, and/or study aides: *Give Us This Day*; *Living with Christ*; *Magnificat*; *The Word Among Us*; etc.
 - Readings for Mass are available on the US Catholic Bishops’ website: <https://bible.usccb.org>
 - See also the *Lectionary for Mass* section of my website: <https://catholic-resources.org/Lectionary>

Reading the Scriptures *Prayerfully*: A Brief Introduction to *Lectio Divina*:

Overview:

- *Lectio Divina* is a “Vital Encounter with the Lord,” not just “Bible Study”
 - It is meant to be enlivening, existential, transformative, and uniting for individuals and communities.
- *Lectio Divina* is not just for monks and religious, but for all believers:
 - **Individuals:** use and adapt *Lectio Divina* flexibly to one’s own needs and personal prayer style.
 - **Groups:** provide a regular pattern of scriptural prayer to build openness and trust in a community.
- “The Church in America should give high priority to prayerful reflection upon the Sacred Scripture by all the faithful. This Bible reading, accompanied by prayer, is known in the tradition of the Church by the name *Lectio Divina*, a practice that should be encouraged among all Christians.” (John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America*, 1999, p. 31)

Lectio Divina Process: (flexibly adapt the following steps, as needed, for individuals and groups)

1. **Reading** (*lectio*) – hearing God’s Word in the Bible as I/we read it aloud
 - What does the biblical text say?
2. **Meditation** (*meditatio*) – reflecting on the meaning of the text that I/we have read
 - What is God saying to me/us through this text?
3. **Prayer** (*oratio*) – speaking with God in praise, thanksgiving, contrition, and petition
 - What do I/we say to God in response to this text?
4. **Contemplation** (*contemplatio*) – listening to God more quietly in the silence of our hearts
 - How does this text make me/us feel in my/our relationship with God?
5. **Action** (*actio/operatio*) – letting the encounter concretely affect our daily life and work in the world
 - How will I/we change what I/we do today in response to hearing this text?

Official Roman Catholic Teachings on the Bible

Dei Verbum

“Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation”

(Second Vatican Council – Nov. 18, 1965)

Chapters:

Preface (§1)

- 1) **Revelation Itself** (§§2-6)
- 2) **The Transmission of Divine Revelation** (§§7-10)
- 3) **Sacred Scripture, Its Divine Inspiration and Interpretation** (§§11-13)
- 4) The Old Testament (§§14-16)
- 5) The New Testament (§§17-20)
- 6) **Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church** (§§21-26)

Full Text:

- Walter M. Abbott, S.J. *The Documents of Vatican II*. New York, 1966.
- Austin Flannery, O.P. *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-conciliar Documents*. Rev. ed. Grand Rapids, 1984; 1992.
- **Online** at [Vatican Website](#) or [cin.org](#)

Catechism of the Catholic Church

The Profession of Faith: “I Believe” - “We Believe”

(Part One, Section One, Chapter Two - §§51-141)

Article 1: **The Revelation of God** (§§51-73)

1. God Reveals His “Plan of Loving Goodness”
2. The Stages of Revelation
3. Christ Jesus – “Mediator and Fullness of All Revelation”

Article 2: **The Transmission of Divine Revelation** (§§74-100)

1. Apostolic Tradition
2. The Relationship between Tradition and Sacred Scripture
3. The Interpretation of the Heritage of Faith

Article 3: **Sacred Scripture** (§§101-141)

1. Christ - The Unique Word of Sacred Scripture
2. Inspiration and Truth of Sacred Scripture
3. The Holy Spirit, Interpreter of Scripture
4. The Canon of Scripture
5. **Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church**

Full Text:

- *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Rome, 1994; 2nd edition, 2000.
- **Online** at [Vatican Website](#) or [USCCB](#) or [St. Charles Borromeo](#).

Overview and Analysis:

A) Catholic teachings about the Bible do not just deal with the written scriptures, but begin from a much broader perspective, first presenting the Church’s teachings about “**The Revelation of God.**” Divine revelation is much *more* than just the Bible; it is the entire process by which God reveals or expresses Himself in our world, what we can call “God’s self-revelation.”

1. God’s self-revelation in **creation**, in all that exists in the universe, from inanimate material, in what we call “nature.”
2. God’s self-revelation in and to the **human race**, who are “created in God’s image and likeness” (see Gen 1:26-27).
3. God’s special revelation to the **people of Israel**, working in and through their history, sending them messages that were passed down orally and eventually written down in the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament).
4. God’s self-revelation in **Jesus Christ**, “the Word made flesh” (see John 1:14), whose words and actions reveal even more clearly everything we need to know about God and our world, about life and love, about forgiveness and salvation.

B) After presenting the broad concept of “Revelation,” but before dealing with the written scriptures, Catholic teachings explain “**The Transmission of Divine Revelation,**” the process by which God’s revelation is “handed down” or “passed on” (Latin *traditio*) through the ages. This is a complex process with several different stages, which one must carefully distinguish:

1. **Historical Events:** the actions of the leaders and people of Israel (OT era), or the actions of Jesus and his disciples (NT era).
2. **Oral Traditions:** stories about what happened, and teachings of leaders, as passed down from one generation to the next.
3. **Written Documents:** books of Moses, prophets, leaders of Israel (OT); Gospels, letters, other early Christian writings (NT).
4. **Canonization and Interpretation:** the “transmission” of God’s revelation continues in the activity of the Church, first in “canonizing” the scriptures we call OT and NT, and also in ongoing teaching, interpretation, and application of God’s word.

C) Only now can we properly see the inter-relationships between **Revelation, Tradition, and Scripture**. In contrast to a naïve fundamentalistic view of biblical authorship, Catholic understanding of the “divine inspiration” of the Bible is a good example of the Church’s overall **BOTH/AND** approach to theology:

1. “Scripture” is *not opposed* to “Tradition.” Rather, “**Scripture**” is *part of* “**Tradition,**” which is *part of* “**Revelation.**”
2. The **Word of God**, in Catholic understanding, is not primarily the Bible (the written text), but is **Jesus Christ** (the incarnate Word). The core of Christian faith is *not the Bible, but Jesus* himself. Jesus came *before* the whole Bible was completed.
3. **The Church** also existed *before* the Bible! The oral preaching of the apostles *preceded* the writing of the NT books (by several *decades*), and the early Church determined the Canon of the Bible (but not until several *centuries* after Jesus’ life).
4. **The Bible** is *both* the Word of God *and* written in human languages. *Both* God *and* the human writers acted as *real authors*.
5. **Interpretation** of the Bible requires awareness of the *literary forms and modes of expression* used by the ancient authors.
6. The “**inspiration**” of the Holy Spirit applies *not only* to the writing stage, but *also* to the whole process of forming the Bible.
7. The **Holy Spirit** *continues* to guide the Christian Church in the correct understanding and application of the scriptures today.

The Essential Key to Catholic Theology: BOTH/AND

by Felix Just, S.J., Ph.D.

The proper Catholic-Christian answer to any theological question is always “both/and” rather than “either/or.”

At first glance, this statement might seem ridiculous or contradictory. Isn't God absolute? Isn't there just one truth, as opposed to error? Indeed, this proposal does *not* imply that a statement and its *direct negation* are both true (“A is B” and “A is not B”). It would be wrong, for example, to claim both “God is Love” and “God is not Love,” or to say both “Jesus is divine” and “Jesus is not divine.”

However, just as every coin has *both heads and tails* sides, just as every battery has *both positive and negative* terminals, and just as the earth has *both a North Pole and a South Pole*, so also the Catholic-Christian answer to any theological question always has (at least) two “sides” or “poles.” These opposite poles may often *seem* far apart and difficult to hold together. It is rarely easy to understand and balance both sides of an issue, just as we can't easily see both sides of a coin at the same time (without a mirror, at least!). Yet the “opposite” sides are seldom real “contradictions,” even if there may be some strong differences and tensions between them.

For example, Christians believe that Jesus is *both God and human*. To a non-Christian, this might seem ridiculous. Even for a Christian, it is hard to understand or explain. How can anyone be *both divine and mortal*? Or how can God be *both transcendent and immanent*? Or how can the Bible be *both the Word of God and human literature*? Can *both creation and evolution* be true somehow? Can *both science and religion* be reconciled? The Catholic answer to all these questions is YES, *both* the one side *and* its opposite not only can, but *must* be held together in tension, even if they seem to be contradictory, in order to understand the whole truth, the whole of the complex reality.

Rather than overemphasizing one pole and neglecting the other, the challenge in Christian theology is always to hold the two poles together, to maintain a proper balance between both seemingly opposite sides of the truth. Another way of phrasing the Catholic position would be to say, “*Not Only..., But Also...*” Here is a list of only some theological issues and the Catholic-Christian answers, which include both poles:

God is	<i>both</i>	Transcendent (beyond)	<i>and</i>	Immanent (within)
God is	<i>both</i>	One Divine Nature	<i>and</i>	Three Divine Persons (Trinity)
God is	<i>both</i>	Almighty Creator	<i>and</i>	Loving Father
Jesus is	<i>both</i>	Fully Human	<i>and</i>	Fully Divine
Jesus is	<i>both</i>	Son of Mary	<i>and</i>	Son of God
Jesus is	<i>both</i>	Messiah of the Jews	<i>and</i>	Savior of All Nations
Mary is	<i>both</i>	Mother of God	<i>and</i>	Mother of (the human) Jesus
Christian life is based on	<i>both</i>	Scripture	<i>and</i>	Tradition
The Bible is	<i>both</i>	Word of God	<i>and</i>	Authored by Humans
The Bible contains	<i>both</i>	Old Testament	<i>and</i>	New Testament
The Bible must be	<i>both</i>	Read Literally	<i>and</i>	Interpreted Spiritually
The Bible should be	<i>both</i>	Meditated Prayerfully	<i>and</i>	Studied Academically
The Church is	<i>both</i>	a Divine Mystery	<i>and</i>	a Human Institution
The Eucharist is	<i>both</i>	the Sacrifice of Christ	<i>and</i>	a Communal Meal of Thanksgiving
Humans can encounter God in	<i>both</i>	Prayer (meditation)	<i>and</i>	Action (work, service)
To be saved we must	<i>both</i>	Believe (have faith)	<i>and</i>	Put Faith into Practice (good works)
As human beings we are	<i>both</i>	Individual persons	<i>and</i>	Members of families & communities
As human beings we are	<i>both</i>	Free to make choices	<i>and</i>	Responsible for choosing the good

The list could go on and on, but I hope you get the point. Just as every coin has two sides, so the best Catholic response to any theological question is not satisfied with either/or choices, with answers that consider only one side. An authentic Catholic-Christian theology always attempts to understand both sides of a reality in all its complexity, and tries to avoid overemphasizing one side while neglecting the other, which leads not only to distortions of the truth but also to unfortunate consequences in practice.