

Read the following *portions* of the document "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," presented by the Pontifical Biblical Commission to Pope John Paul II on April 23, 1993 (as published in *Origins*, January 6, 1994)

Note: Words printed in red font appear in the student glossary, page three of the Summer Reading Assignment document.

"The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church"

Presented by the Pontifical Biblical Commission
to Pope John Paul II on April 23, 1993
(as published in *Origins*, January 6, 1994)

INTRODUCTION

The interpretation of biblical texts continues in our own day to be a matter of lively interest and significant debate. In recent years the discussions involved have taken on some new dimensions. Granted the fundamental importance of the Bible for Christian faith, for the life of the church and for relations between Christians and the faithful of other religions, the Pontifical Biblical Commission has been asked to make a statement on this subject.

A. The State of the Question Today

The problem of the interpretation of the Bible is hardly a modern phenomenon, even if at times that is what some would have us believe. The Bible itself bears witness that its interpretation can be a difficult matter. Alongside texts that are perfectly clear, it contains passages of some obscurity. When reading certain prophecies of Jeremiah, Daniel pondered at length over their meaning (Dn. 9:2). According to the Acts of the Apostles, an Ethiopian of the first century found himself in the same situation with respect to a passage from the Book of Isaiah (Is. 53:7-8) and recognized that he had need of an interpreter (Acts 8:30-35). The Second Letter of Peter insists that "no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of private interpretation" (2 Pt. 1:20), and it also observes that the letters of the apostle Paul contain "some difficult passages, the meaning of which the ignorant and untrained distort, as they do also in the case of the other Scriptures, to their own ruin" (2 Pt. 3: 16).

The problem is therefore quite old. But it has been accentuated with the passage of time. Readers today, in order to appropriate the words and deeds of which the Bible speaks, have to project themselves back almost 20 or 30 centuries--a process which always creates difficulty. Furthermore, because of the progress made in the human sciences, questions of interpretation have become more complex in modern times. Scientific methods have been adopted for the study of the texts of the ancient world. To what extent can these methods be considered appropriate for the interpretation of holy Scripture? For

a long period the church in her pastoral prudence showed herself very reticent in responding to this question, for often the methods, despite their positive elements, have shown themselves to be wedded to positions hostile to the Christian faith. But a more positive attitude has also evolved, signaled by a whole series of pontifical documents, ranging from the encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* of Leo XIII (Nov. 18, 1893) to the encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* of Pius XII (Sept. 30, 1943), and this has been confirmed by the declaration *Sancta Mater Ecclesia* of the Pontifical Biblical Commission (April 21, 1964) and above all by the dogmatic constitution *Dei Verbum* of the Second Vatican Council (Nov. 18, 1965).

That this more constructive attitude has borne fruit cannot be denied. Biblical studies have made great progress in the Catholic Church, and the academic value of these studies has been acknowledged more and more in the scholarly world and among the faithful. This has greatly smoothed the path of ecumenical dialogue. The deepening of the Bible's influence upon theology has contributed to theological renewal. Interest in the Bible has grown among Catholics, with resultant progress in the Christian life. All those who have acquired a solid formation in this area consider it quite impossible to return to a precritical level of interpretation, a level which they now rightly judge to be quite inadequate.

But the fact is that at the very time when the most prevalent scientific method--the "historical-critical method"--is freely practiced in exegesis, including Catholic exegesis, it is itself brought into question. To some extent, this has come about in the scholarly world itself through the rise of alternative methods and approaches. But it has also arisen through the criticisms of many members of the faithful, who judge the method deficient from the point of view of faith. The historical-critical method, as its name suggests, is particularly attentive to the historical development of texts or traditions across the passage of time... But at the present time in certain quarters it finds itself in competition with methods which insist upon an ... understanding of texts... which has to do with their language, composition, narrative structure and capacity for persuasion. Moreover, for many interpreters the ... concern to reconstruct the past has given way to a tendency to ask questions of texts by viewing them within a number of contemporary perspectives--philosophical, psychoanalytic, sociological, political, etc. Some value this plurality of methods and approaches as an indication of richness, but to others it gives the impression of much confusion.

Whether real or apparent, this confusion has brought fresh fuel to the arguments of those opposed to scientific exegesis. The diversity of interpretations only serves to show, they say, that nothing is gained by submitting biblical texts to the demands of scientific method; on the contrary, they allege, much is lost thereby. They insist that the result of scientific exegesis is only to provoke perplexity and doubt upon numerous points which hitherto had been accepted without difficulty. They add that it impels some exegetes to

adopt positions contrary to the faith of the church on matters of great importance such as the virginal conception of Jesus and his miracles, and even his resurrection and divinity.

Even when it does not end up in such negative positions, scientific exegesis, they claim, is notable for its sterility in what concerns progress in the Christian life. Instead of making for easier and more secure access to the living sources of God's word, it makes of the Bible a closed book. Interpretation may always have been something of a problem, but now it requires such technical refinements as to render it a domain reserved for a few specialists alone....

As a result, in place of the patient toil of scientific exegesis, they think it necessary to substitute simpler approaches such as one or other of the various forms of **synchronic** reading which may be considered appropriate. Some even, turning their backs upon all study, advocate a so-called "spiritual" reading of the Bible, by which they understand a reading guided solely by personal inspiration--one that is subjective--and intended only to nourish such inspiration. Some seek above all to find in the Bible the Christ of their own personal vision [eisegesis] and, along with it, the satisfaction of their own spontaneous religious feelings. Others claim to find there immediate answers to all kinds of questions touching both their own lives and that of the community. There are, moreover, numerous sects which propose as the only way of interpretation one that has been revealed to them alone.

B. Purpose of This Document

It is, then, appropriate to give serious consideration to the various aspects of the present situation as regards the interpretation of the Bible--to attend to the criticisms and the complaints as also to the hopes and aspirations which are being expressed in this matter, to assess the possibilities opened up by the new methods and approaches and, finally, to try to determine more precisely the direction which best corresponds to the mission of exegesis in the Catholic Church.

Such is the purpose of this document. The Pontifical Biblical Commission desires to indicate the paths most appropriate for arriving at an interpretation of the Bible as faithful as possible to its character both human and divine. The commission does not aim to adopt a position on all the questions which arise with respect to the Bible such as, for example, the theology of inspiration. What it has in mind is to examine all the methods likely to contribute effectively to the task of making more available the riches contained in the biblical texts. The aim is that the word of God may become more and more the spiritual nourishment of the members of the people of God, the source for them of a life of faith, of hope and of love--and indeed a light for all humanity (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 21).

....

I. METHODS AND APPROACHES FOR INTERPRETATION

A. Historical-Critical Method

The historical-critical method is the indispensable method for the scientific study of the meaning of ancient texts. Holy Scripture, inasmuch as it is the "word of God in human language," has been composed by human authors in all its various parts and in all the sources that lie behind them. Because of this, its proper understanding not only admits the use of this method but actually requires it.

1. History of the Method

For a correct understanding of this method as currently employed, a glance over its history will be of assistance. Certain elements of this method of interpretation are very ancient. They were used in antiquity by Greek commentators of classical literature and, much later, in the course of the patristic period by authors such as Origen, Jerome and Augustine. The method at that time was much less developed. Its modern forms are the result of refinements brought about especially since the time of the Renaissance humanists and their return to the sources.

The textual criticism of the New Testament was able to be developed as a scientific discipline only from about 1800 onward.... But the beginnings of literary criticism go back to the 17th century, to the work of Richard Simon, who drew attention to the doublets, discrepancies in content and differences of style observable in the Pentateuch--discoveries not easy to reconcile with the attribution of the entire text to Moses as single author. In the 18th century, Jean Astruc was still satisfied that the matter could be explained on the basis that Moses had made use of various sources (especially two principal ones) to compose the Book of Genesis. But as time passed biblical critics contested the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch with ever growing confidence.

Literary criticism for a long time came to be identified with the attempt to distinguish in texts different sources. Thus it was that there developed in the 19th century the "documentary hypothesis," which sought to give an explanation of the editing of the Pentateuch. According to this hypothesis, four documents, to some extent parallel with each other, had been woven together: that of the Yahwist (J), that of the Elohist (E), that of the Deuteronomist (D) and that of the priestly author (P); the final editor made use of this latter (priestly) document to provide a structure for the whole.

In similar fashion, to explain both the agreements and disagreements between the three synoptic Gospels, scholars had recourse to the "two source" hypothesis. According to this, the Gospels of Matthew and Luke were composed out of two principal sources: on the one hand, the Gospel of Mark and, on the other, a collection of the sayings of Jesus (called Q, from the German word Quelle, meaning "source"). In their essential features,

these two hypotheses retain their prominence in scientific exegesis today--though they are also under challenge.

In the desire to establish the chronology of the biblical texts, this kind of literary criticism restricted itself to the task of dissecting and dismantling the text in order to identify the various sources. It did not pay sufficient attention to the final form of the biblical text and to the message which it conveyed in the state in which it actually exists (the contribution of editors was not held in high regard). This meant that historical-critical exegesis could often seem to be something which simply dissolved and destroyed the text....

It was Hermann Gunkel who brought the method out of the ghetto of literary criticism understood in this way. Although he continued to regard the books of the Pentateuch as compilations, he attended to the particular texture of the different elements of the text. He sought to define the **genre** of each piece (e.g., whether "legend" or "hymn") and its original setting in the life of the community or *Sitz im Leben* (e.g., a legal setting or a liturgical one, etc.).

To this kind of research into literary **genres** was joined the "critical study of forms,"... [form criticism]

One of the results of this method has been to demonstrate more clearly that the tradition recorded in the New Testament had its origin and found its basic shape within Christian community or early church, passing from the preaching of Jesus himself to that which proclaimed that Jesus is the Christ. Eventually, form criticism was supplemented by redaction criticism, the "critical study of the process of editing." This sought to shed light upon the personal contribution of each evangelist and to uncover the theological tendencies which shaped his editorial work.

When this last method was brought into play, the whole series of different stages characteristic of the historical-critical method became complete: From textual criticism one progresses to literary criticism, with its work of dissection in the quest for sources; then one moves to a critical study of forms and, finally, to an analysis of the editorial process, which aims to be particularly attentive to the text as it has been put together. All this has made it possible to understand far more accurately the intention of the authors and editors of the Bible as well as the message which they addressed to their first readers. The achievement of these results has lent the historical-critical method an importance of the highest order.

2. Principles

The fundamental principles of the historical-critical method in its classic form are the following:

It is a historical method, not only because it is applied to ancient texts--in this case, those of the Bible--and studies their significance from a historical point of view, but also and above all because it seeks to shed light upon the historical processes which gave rise to biblical texts, ...processes that were often complex and involved a long period of time. At the different stages of their production, the texts of the Bible were addressed to various categories of hearers or readers living in different places and different times.

It is a critical method, because in each of its steps (from textual criticism to redaction criticism) it operates with the help of scientific criteria that seek to be as objective as possible. In this way it aims to make accessible to the modern reader the meaning of biblical texts, often very difficult to comprehend.

As an analytical method, it studies the biblical text in the same fashion as it would study any other ancient text and comments upon it as an expression of human discourse. However, above all in the area of redaction criticism, it does allow the exegete to gain a better grasp of the content of divine revelation.

3. Description

At the present stage of its development, the historical-critical method moves through the following steps:

Textual criticism, as practiced for a very long time, begins the series of scholarly operations. Basing itself on the testimony of the oldest and best manuscripts, as well as of papyri, certain ancient versions and patristic texts, textual-criticism seeks to establish, according to fixed rules, a biblical text as close as possible to the original.

The text is then submitted to [the analysis of how language operates]. It is the role of literary criticism to determine the beginning and end of textual units, large and small, and to establish the internal coherence of the text. The existence of doublets [parallel versions of the same material], of irreconcilable differences and of other indicators is a clue to the composite character of certain texts. These can then be divided into small units, the next step being to see whether these in turn can be assigned to different sources.

Genre criticism seeks to identify literary **genres**, the social [context] that gave rise to them, their particular features and the history of their development. Tradition criticism situates texts in the stream of tradition [both oral and written traditions] and attempts to describe the development of this tradition over the course of time. Finally, redaction criticism studies the modifications that these texts have undergone before being fixed in their final state, it also analyzes this final stage, trying as far as possible to identify the tendencies particularly characteristic of this concluding process.

While the preceding steps have sought to explain the text by tracing its origin and development, this last step concludes with a study that [attempts to explain the text] as it stands, on the basis of the mutual relationships between its diverse elements, and with an eye to its character as a message communicated by the author to his contemporaries. At this point one is in a position to consider the demands of the text from the point of view of action and life....

When the texts studied belong to a historical literary **genre** or are related to events of history, historical criticism completes literary criticism so as to determine the historical significance of the text in the modern sense of this expression.

It is in this way that one accounts for the various stages that lie behind the biblical revelation in its concrete historical development.

4. Evaluation

What value should we accord to the historical-critical method, especially at this present stage of its development? ...

Oriented in its origins toward source criticism and the history of religions, the method has managed to provide fresh access to the Bible. It has shown the Bible to be a collection of writings, which most often, especially in the case of the Old Testament, are not the creation of a single author, but which have had a long prehistory inextricably tied either to the history of Israel or to that of the early church. Previously, the Jewish or Christian interpretation of the Bible had no clear awareness of the concrete and diverse historical conditions in which the word of God took root among the people; of all this it had only a general and remote awareness....

To be sure, the classic use of the historical-critical method reveals its limitations. It restricts itself to a search for the meaning of the biblical text within the historical circumstances that gave rise to it and is not concerned with other possibilities of meaning which have been revealed at later stages of the biblical revelation and history of the church. Nonetheless, this method has contributed to the production of works of exegesis and of biblical theology which are of great value.

...[It is important to note, though, that] it is the text in its final stage, rather than in its earlier editions, which is the expression of the word of God. But **diachronic** study remains indispensable for making known the historical dynamism which animates sacred Scripture and for shedding light upon its rich complexity: For example, the covenant code (Ex. 21-23) reflects a political, social and religious situation of Israelite society different from that reflected in the other law codes preserved in Deuteronomy (Chapters 12-26) and in Leviticus (the holiness code, Chapters 17-26). We must take care not to replace the historicizing tendency, for which the older historical-critical exegesis is open to criticism,

with the opposite excess, that of neglecting history in favor of an exegesis which would be exclusively **synchronic**.

To sum up, the goal of the historical-critical method is to determine...the meaning expressed by the biblical authors and editors. Along with other methods and approaches, the historical-critical method opens up to the modern reader a path to the meaning of the biblical text such as we have it today.

B. New Methods of Literary Analysis (*not assigned*)

C. Approaches Based on Tradition

...The Bible is not a compilation of texts unrelated to each other; rather, it is a gathering together of a whole array of witnesses from one great tradition. To be fully adequate to the object of its study, biblical exegesis must keep this truth firmly in mind. Such in fact is the perspective adopted by a number of approaches which are being developed at present.

1. Canonical Approach

The "canonical" approach, which originated in the United States some 20 years ago, proceeds from the perception that the historical-critical method experiences at times considerable difficulty in arriving, in its conclusions, at a truly theological level. It aims to carry out the theological task of interpretation more successfully by beginning from within an explicit framework of faith: the Bible as a whole.

To achieve this, it interprets each biblical text in the light of the canon of Scriptures, that is to say, of the Bible as received as the norm of faith by a community of believers. It seeks to situate each text within the single plan of God, the goal being to arrive at a presentation of Scripture truly valid for our time. The method does not claim to be a substitute for the historical-critical method; the hope is, rather, to complete it.

Two different points of view have been proposed:

Brevard S. Childs centers his interest on the final canonical form of the text (whether book or collection), the form accepted by the community as an authoritative expression of its faith and rule of life.

James A. Sanders, rather than looking to the final and fixed form of the text, devotes his attention to the "canonical process" or progressive development of the Scriptures which the believing community has accepted as a normative authority. The critical study of this process examines the way in which older traditions have been used again and again in new contexts before finally coming to constitute a whole that is at once stable and yet adaptable, coherent while holding together matter that is diverse--in short, a complete

whole in which the faith community can find its identity. In the course of this process various hermeneutic procedures have been at work, and this continues to be the case even after the fixing of the canon. These procedures are often **midrashic** in nature, serving to make the biblical text relevant for a later time. They encourage a constant interaction between the community and the Scriptures, calling for an interpretation which ever seeks to bring the tradition up to date.

The canonical approach rightly reacts against placing an exaggerated value upon what is supposed to be original and early, as if this alone were authentic. Inspired Scripture is precisely Scripture in that it has been recognized by the church as the rule of faith. Hence the significance, in this light, of both the final form in which each of the books of the Bible appears and of the complete whole which all together make up as canon. Each individual book only becomes biblical in the light of the canon as a whole.

It is the believing community that provides a truly adequate context for interpreting canonical texts. In this context faith and the Holy Spirit enrich exegesis; church authority, exercised as a service of the community, must see to it that this interpretation remains faithful to the great tradition which has produced the texts (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 10).

The canonical approach finds itself grappling with more than one problem when it seeks to define the "canonical process." At what point in time precisely does a text become canonical? It seems reasonable to describe it as such from the time that the community attributes to it a normative authority, even if this should be before it has reached its final, definitive form. One can speak of a "canonical" hermeneutic once the repetition of the traditions, which comes about through the taking into account of new aspects of the situation (be they religious, cultural or theological), begins to preserve the identity of the message. But a question arises: Should the interpretive process which led to the formation of the canon be recognized as the guiding principle for the interpretation of Scripture today?

On the other hand, the complex relationships that exist between the Jewish and Christian canons of Scripture raise many problems of interpretation. The Christian church has received as "Old Testament" the writings which had authority in the Hellenistic Jewish community, but some of these are either lacking in the Hebrew Bible or appear there in somewhat different form. The corpus is therefore different. From this it follows that the canonical interpretation cannot be identical in each case, granted that each text must be read in relation to the whole corpus. But, above all, the church reads the Old Testament in the light of the paschal mystery--the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ--who brings a radical newness and, with sovereign authority, gives a meaning to the Scriptures that is decisive and definitive (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 4). This new determination of meaning has become an integral element of Christian faith. It ought not, however, mean doing away with all attempt to be consistent with that earlier canonical interpretation which preceded

the Christian Passover. One must respect each stage of the history of salvation. To empty out of the Old Testament its own proper meaning would be to deprive the New of its roots in history.

2. Approach Through Recourse to Jewish Traditions of Interpretation

The Old Testament reached its final form in the Jewish world of the four or five centuries preceding the Christian era. Judaism of this time also provided the matrix for the origin of the New Testament and the infant church. Numerous studies of the history of ancient Judaism and notably the manifold research stimulated by the discoveries at Qumran have highlighted the complexity of the Jewish world, both in the land of Israel and in the Diaspora, throughout this period.

It is in this world that the interpretation of Scripture had its beginning. One of the most ancient witnesses to the Jewish interpretation of the Bible is the Greek translation known as the Septuagint. The Aramaic **Targums** represent a further witness to the same activity which has carried on down to the present, giving rise in the process to an immense mass of learned procedures for the preservation of the text of the Old Testament and for the explanation of the meaning of biblical texts. At all stages, the more astute Christian exegetes, from Origen and Jerome onward, have sought to draw profit from the Jewish biblical learning in order to acquire a better understanding of Scripture. Many modern exegetes follow this example.

The ancient Jewish traditions allow for a better understanding particularly of the Septuagint, the Jewish Bible which eventually became the first part of the Christian Bible for at least the first four centuries of the church and has remained so in the East down to the present day. The extracanonical Jewish literature, called apocryphal or intertestamental, in its great abundance and variety, is an important source for the interpretation of the New Testament. The variety of exegetical procedures practiced by the different strains of Judaism can actually be found within the Old Testament itself, for example in Chronicles with reference to the books of Samuel and Kings, and also within the New Testament, as for example in certain ways Paul goes about argument from Scripture. A great variety of forms--parables, allegories, anthologies ... methods of associating otherwise unrelated texts, psalms and hymns, vision, revelation and dream sequences, wisdom compositions--all are common to both the Old and the New Testaments as well as in Jewish circles before and after the time of Jesus. The **Targums** and the **Midrashic** literature illustrate the homiletic tradition and mode of biblical interpretation practiced by wide sectors of Judaism in the first centuries.

....

3. Approach by the History of the Influence of the Text

This approach rests upon two principles: a) a text only becomes a literary work insofar as it encounters readers who give life to it by appropriating it to themselves; b) this appropriation of the text, which can occur either on the individual or community level and can take shape in various spheres (literary, artistic, theological, ascetical and mystical), contributes to a better understanding of the text itself.

Without being entirely unknown in antiquity, this approach was developed in literary studies between 1960 and 1970, a time when criticism became interested in the relation between a text and its readers. Biblical studies can only draw profit from research of this kind, all the more so since the philosophy of hermeneutics for its own part stresses the necessary distance between a work and its author as well as between a work and its readers. Within this perspective, the history of the effect produced by a book or a passage of Scripture ...[called "History of Influence Analysis"] seeks to assess the development of interpretation over the course of time under the influence of the concerns readers have brought to the text. It also attempts to evaluate the importance of the role played by tradition in finding meaning in biblical texts.

The mutual presence to each other of text and readers creates its own dynamic, for the text exercises an influence and provokes reactions. It makes a resonant claim that is heard by readers whether as individuals or as members of a group. The reader is in any case never an isolated subject. He or she belongs to a social context and lives within a tradition. Readers come to the text with their own questions, exercise a certain selectivity, propose an interpretation and, in the end, are able either to create a further work or else take initiatives inspired directly from their reading of Scripture.

...History ... illustrates the prevalence from time to time of interpretations that are tendentious and false, baneful in their effect--such as, for example, those that have promoted anti-Semitism or other forms of racial discrimination or, yet again, various kinds of millenarian delusions. This serves to show that this approach cannot constitute a discipline that would ...[stand alone]. Discernment is required. Care must be exercised not to privilege one or other stage of the history of the text's influence to such an extent that it becomes the sole norm of its interpretation for all time.

D. Approaches That Use the Human Sciences

In order to communicate itself, the word of God has taken root in the life of human communities (cf. Sir. 24:12), and it has been through the psychological dispositions of the various persons who composed the biblical writings that it has pursued its path. It follows, then, that the human sciences--in particular sociology, anthropology and psychology--can contribute toward a better understanding of certain aspects of biblical texts. It should be noted, however, that in this area there are several schools of thought, with notable disagreement among them on the very nature of these sciences. That said, a

good number of exegetes have drawn considerable profit in recent years from research of this kind.

...

2. The Approach Through Cultural Anthropology

... While the sociological approach--as we have just mentioned--studies economic and institutional aspects above all, the anthropological approach is interested in a wide assortment of other aspects, reflected in language, art, religion, but also in dress, ornament, celebration, dance, myth, legend and all that concerns ethnography.

In general, cultural anthropology seeks to define the characteristics of different kinds of human beings in their social context--as, for example the "Mediterranean person"--with all that this involves by way of studying the rural or urban context and with attention paid to the values recognized by the society in question (honor and dishonor, secrecy, keeping faith, tradition, kinds of education and schooling), to the manner in which social control is exercised, to the ideas which people have of family house, kin, to the situation of women, to institutionalized dualities (patron - client, owner - tenant, benefactor - beneficiary, free person - slave), taking into account also the prevailing conception of the sacred and the profane, taboos, rites of passage from one state to another, magic, the source of wealth, of power, of information, etc. On the basis of these diverse elements, typologies and "models" are constructed, which are claimed to be common to a number of cultures.

Clearly this kind of study can be useful for the interpretation of biblical texts. It has been effectively applied to the study of the ideas of kinship in the Old Testament, of the position of women in Israelite society, of the influence of agrarian rituals, etc. In the texts which report the teaching of Jesus, for example the parables, many details can be explained thanks to this approach. This is also the case with regard to fundamental ideas, such as that of the reign of God or of the way of conceiving time with respect to the history of salvation, as well as of the processes by which the first Christians came to gather in communities. This approach allows one to distinguish more clearly those elements of the biblical message that are permanent, as having their foundation in human nature, and those which are more contingent, being due to the particular features of certain cultures. Nevertheless, no more than is the case with respect to other particularized approaches, this approach is not qualified simply by itself to determine what is specifically the content of revelation. It is important to keep this in mind when appreciating the valuable results it has brought.

3. Psychological and Psychoanalytical Approaches

Psychology and theology continue their mutual dialogue. ... Whole works have been devoted to the psychoanalytic interpretation of biblical texts, which has led to vigorous

discussion: In what measure and under what conditions can psychological and psychoanalytical research contribute to a deeper understanding of sacred Scripture?

Psychological and psychoanalytical studies do bring a certain enrichment to biblical exegesis in that, because of them, the texts of the Bible can be better understood in terms of experience of life and norms of behavior. ...

Numerous examples could be cited showing the necessity of a collaborative effort on the part of exegetes and psychologists: to ascertain the meaning of cultic ritual, of sacrifice, of bans, to explain the use of imagery in biblical language, the metaphorical significance of miracle stories, the wellsprings of apocalyptic visual and auditory experiences. It is not simply a matter of describing the symbolic language of the Bible but of grasping how it functions with respect to the revelation of mystery and the issuing of challenge--where the "numinous" reality of God enters into contact with the human person....

The human sciences are not confined to sociology, cultural anthropology and psychology. Other disciplines can also be very useful for the interpretation of the Bible. In all these areas it is necessary to take good account of competence in the particular field and to recognize that only rarely will one and the same person be fully qualified in both exegesis and one or other of the human sciences.

...

F. Fundamentalist Interpretation

Fundamentalist interpretation starts from the principle that the Bible, being the word of God, inspired and free from error, should be read and interpreted literally in all its details. But by "literal interpretation" it understands a naively literalist interpretation, one, that is to say, which excludes every effort at understanding the Bible that takes account of its historical origins and development. It is opposed, therefore, to the use of the historical-critical method, as indeed to the use of any other scientific method for the interpretation of Scripture.

The fundamentalist interpretation had its origin at the time of the Reformation, arising out of a concern for fidelity to the literal meaning of Scripture. After the century of the Enlightenment it emerged in Protestantism as a bulwark against liberal exegesis.

The actual term fundamentalist is connected directly with the American Biblical Congress held at Niagara, N.Y., in 1895. At this meeting, conservative Protestant exegetes defined "five points of fundamentalism": the verbal inerrancy of Scripture, the divinity of Christ, his virginal birth, the doctrine of vicarious expiation and the bodily resurrection at the time of the second coming of Christ. As the fundamentalist way of reading the Bible spread to other parts of the world, it gave rise to other ways of interpretation, equally "literalist," in Europe, Asia, Africa and South America. As the

20th century comes to an end, this kind of interpretation is winning more and more adherents, in religious groups and sects, as also among Catholics.

Fundamentalism is right to insist on the divine inspiration of the Bible, the inerrancy of the word of God and other biblical truths included in its five fundamental points. But its way of presenting these truths is rooted in an ideology which is not biblical, whatever the proponents of this approach might say. For it demands an unshakable adherence to rigid doctrinal points of view and imposes, as the only source of teaching for Christian life and salvation, a reading of the Bible which rejects all questioning and any kind of critical research.

The basic problem with fundamentalist interpretation of this kind is that, refusing to take into account the historical character of biblical revelation, it makes itself incapable of accepting the full truth of the **incarnation** itself. As regards relationships with God, fundamentalism seeks to escape any closeness of the divine and the human. It refuses to admit that the inspired word of God has been expressed in human language and that this word has been expressed, under divine inspiration, by human authors possessed of limited capacities and resources. For this reason, it tends to treat the biblical text as if it had been dictated word for word by the Spirit. It fails to recognize that the word of God has been formulated in language and expression conditioned by various periods. It pays no attention to the literary forms and to the human ways of thinking to be found in the biblical texts, many of which are the result of a process extending over long periods of time and bearing the mark of very diverse historical situations.

Fundamentalism also places undue stress upon the inerrancy of certain details in the biblical texts, especially in what concerns historical events or supposedly scientific truth. It often historicizes material which from the start never claimed to be historical. It considers historical everything that is reported or recounted with verbs in the past tense, failing to take the necessary account of the possibility of symbolic or figurative meaning.

Fundamentalism often shows a tendency to ignore or to deny the problems presented by the biblical text in its original Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek form. It is often narrowly bound to one fixed translation, whether old or present-day. By the same token it fails to take account of the "rereadings" ... of certain texts which are found within the Bible itself.

In what concerns the Gospels, fundamentalism does not take into account the development of the Gospel tradition, but naively confuses the final stage of this tradition (what the evangelists have written) with the initial (the words and deeds of the historical Jesus). At the same time fundamentalism neglects an important fact: The way in which the first Christian communities themselves understood the impact produced by Jesus of Nazareth and his message. But it is precisely there that we find a witness to the apostolic

origin of the Christian faith and its direct expression. Fundamentalism thus misrepresents the call voiced by the Gospel itself.

Fundamentalism likewise tends to adopt very narrow points of view. It accepts the literal reality of an ancient, out-of-date cosmology simply because it is found expressed in the Bible; this blocks any dialogue with a broader way of seeing the relationship between culture and faith. Its relying upon a non-critical reading of certain texts of the Bible serves to reinforce political ideas and social attitudes that are marked by prejudices--racism, for example--quite contrary to the Christian Gospel.

Finally, in its attachment to the principle "Scripture alone," fundamentalism separates the interpretation of the Bible from the tradition, which, guided by the Spirit, has authentically developed in union with Scripture in the heart of the community of faith. It fails to realize that the New Testament took form within the Christian church and that it is the Holy Scripture of this church, the existence of which preceded the composition of the texts. Because of this, fundamentalism is often anti-church, it considers of little importance the creeds, the doctrines and liturgical practices which have become part of church tradition, as well as the teaching function of the church itself. It presents itself as a form of private interpretation which does not acknowledge that the church is founded on the Bible and draws its life and inspiration from Scripture.

The fundamentalist approach is dangerous, for it is attractive to people who look to the Bible for ready answers to the problems of life. It can deceive these people, offering them interpretations that are pious but illusory, instead of telling them that the Bible does not necessarily contain an immediate answer to each and every problem. Without saying as much in so many words, fundamentalism actually invites people to a kind of intellectual suicide. It 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.

II. HERMENEUTICAL QUESTIONS

B. The Meaning of Inspired Scripture

The contribution made by modern philosophical hermeneutics and the recent development of literary theory allows biblical exegesis to deepen its understanding of the task before it, the complexity of which has become ever more evident. Ancient exegesis, which obviously could not take into account modern scientific requirements, attributed to every text of Scripture several levels of meaning. The most prevalent distinction was that between the literal sense and the spiritual sense. ...

1. The Literal Sense

It is not only legitimate, it is also absolutely necessary to seek to define the precise meaning of texts as produced by their authors--what is called the "literal" meaning. St. Thomas Aquinas had already affirmed the fundamental importance of this sense (S. Th. I, q. 1,a. 10, ad 1).

The literal sense is not to be confused with the "literalist" sense to which fundamentalists are attached. It is not sufficient to translate a text word for word in order to obtain its literal sense. One must understand the text according to the literary conventions of the time. When a text is metaphorical, its literal sense is not that which flows immediately from a word-to-word translation (e.g. "Let your loins be girt": Lk. 12:35), but that which corresponds to the metaphorical use of these terms ("Be ready for action"). When it is a question of a story, the literal sense does not necessarily imply belief that the facts recounted actually took place, for a story need not belong to the **genre** of history but be instead a work of imaginative fiction.

The literal sense of Scripture is that which has been expressed directly by the inspired human authors. Since it is the fruit of inspiration, this sense is also intended by God, as principal author. One arrives at this sense by means of a careful analysis of the text, within its literary and historical context. The principal task of exegesis is to carry out this analysis, making use of all the resources of literary and historical research, with a view to defining the literal sense of the biblical texts with the greatest possible accuracy (cf. *Divino Afflante Spiritu: Ench. Bibl.*, 550). To this end, the study of ancient literary **genres** is particularly necessary (*ibid.* 560).

Does a text have only one literal sense? In general, yes; but there is no question here of a hard and fast rule, and this for two reasons. First, a human author can intend to refer at one and the same time to more than one level of reality.... Second, even when a human utterance appears to have only one meaning, divine inspiration can guide the expression in such way as to create more than one meaning. This is the case with the saying of Caiaphas in John 11:50: At one and the same time it expresses both an immoral political ploy and a divine revelation. The two aspects belong, both of them, to the literal sense, for they are both made clear by the context. Although this example may be extreme, it remains significant, providing a warning against adopting too narrow a conception of the inspired text's literal sense. ...

It does not follow from this that we can attribute to a biblical text whatever meaning we like, interpreting it in a wholly subjective way. On the contrary, one must reject as unauthentic every interpretation alien to the meaning expressed by the human authors in their written text. To admit the possibility of such alien meanings would be equivalent to cutting off the biblical message from its root, which is the word of God in its historical communication; it would also mean opening the door to interpretations of a wildly subjective nature.

2. The Spiritual Sense

...The paschal event, the death and resurrection of Jesus, has established a radically new historical context, which sheds fresh light upon the ancient texts and causes them to undergo a change in meaning. In particular, certain texts which in ancient times had to be thought of as hyperbole (e.g. the oracle where God, speaking of a son of David, promised to establish his throne "forever": 2 Sm. 7:12-13; 1 Chr. 17:11-14), these texts must now be taken literally, because "Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more" (Rom. 6:9). Exegetes who have a narrow, "historicist" idea about the literal sense will judge that here is an example of an interpretation alien to the original. Those who are open to the dynamic aspect of a text will recognize here a profound element of continuity as well as a move to a different level: Christ rules forever, but not on the earthly throne of David (cf. also Ps. 2:7-8; 110: 1.4).

In such cases one speaks of "the spiritual sense." As a general rule we can define the spiritual sense, as understood by Christian faith, as the meaning expressed by the biblical texts when read under the influence of the Holy Spirit, in the context of the paschal mystery of Christ and of the new life which flows from it. This context truly exists. In it the New Testament recognizes the fulfillment of the Scriptures. It is therefore quite acceptable to reread the Scriptures in the light of this new context, which is that of life in the Spirit....

While there is a distinction between the two senses, the spiritual sense can never be stripped of its connection with the literal sense. The latter remains the indispensable foundation. Otherwise one could not speak of the "fulfillment" of Scripture. Indeed, in order that there be fulfillment, a relationship of continuity and of conformity is essential. But it is also necessary that there be transition to a higher level of reality.

The spiritual sense is not to be confused with subjective interpretations stemming from the imagination or intellectual speculation. The spiritual sense results from setting the text in relation to real facts which are not foreign to it: the paschal event, in all its inexhaustible richness, which constitutes the summit of the divine intervention in the history of Israel, to the benefit of humankind.

3. The Fuller Sense

The term *fuller sense* (*sensus plenior*), which is relatively recent, has given rise to discussion. The fuller sense is defined as a deeper meaning of the text, intended by God but not clearly expressed by the human author. Its existence in the biblical text comes to be known when one studies the text in the light of other biblical texts which utilize it or in its relationship with the internal development of revelation.

It is then a question either of the meaning that a subsequent biblical author attributes to an earlier biblical text, taking it up in a context which confers upon it a new literal sense, or else it is a question of the meaning that an authentic doctrinal tradition or a conciliar definition gives to a biblical text. For example, the context of Matthew 1:23 gives a fuller sense to the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 in regard to the *almah* who will conceive, by using the translation of the Septuagint (*parthenos*): "The *virgin* will conceive."...

In a word, one might think of the "fuller sense" as another way of indicating the spiritual sense of a biblical text in the case where the spiritual sense is distinct from the literal sense. It has its foundation in the fact that 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--on the one hand, through further divine interventions which clarify the meaning of texts and, on the other, through the insertion of texts into the canon of Scripture. In these ways there is created a new context, which brings out fresh possibilities of meaning that had lain hidden in the original context.

III. CHARACTERISTICS OF CATHOLIC INTERPRETATION

Catholic exegesis does not claim any particular scientific method as its own. It recognizes that one of the aspects of biblical texts is that they are the work of human authors, who employed both their own capacities for expression and the means which their age and social context put at their disposal. Consequently Catholic exegesis freely makes use of the scientific methods and approaches which allow a better grasp of the meaning of texts in their linguistic, literary, sociocultural, religious and historical contexts, while explaining them as well through studying their sources and attending to the personality of each author (cf. *Divino Afflante Spiritu: Ench. Bibl. 557*). Catholic exegesis actively contributes to the development of new methods and to the progress of research.

What characterizes Catholic exegesis is that it deliberately places itself within the living tradition of the church, whose first concern is fidelity to the revelation attested by the Bible. Modern hermeneutics has made clear, as we have noted, the impossibility of interpreting a text without starting from a "pre-understanding" of one type or another.

Catholic exegetes approach the biblical text with a pre-understanding which holds closely together modern scientific culture and the religious tradition emanating from Israel and from the early Christian community. Their interpretation stands thereby in continuity with a dynamic pattern of interpretation that is found within the Bible itself and continues in the life of the church. This dynamic pattern corresponds to the requirement that there be a lived affinity between the interpreter and the object, an affinity which constitutes, in fact, one of the conditions that makes the entire exegetical enterprise possible.

All pre-understanding, however, brings dangers with it. As regards Catholic exegesis, the risk is that of attributing to biblical texts a meaning which they do not contain but which is the product of a later development within the tradition. The exegete must beware of such a danger. [eisegesis]