

The full meaning of Scripture

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One of the driving forces behind the Protestant Reformation was the desire to make the spiritual power of Scripture available to all God's children. This goal was, and remains, an honorable one.

But all good things, pushed too far, can have catastrophic results. In this case, not only did the reformers want to take the padlock off the Bible, but some asserted that it was through Scripture alone, unimpeded by human interpretations, that Christians could come to true faith. Such faith would be purified, freed of the accretions of 1,500 years, and would sparkle in the sun as did the early faith of the apostles.

Of course, as the reformers read the Scripture, they developed an understanding of it. Human understanding – for good or for ill – is always rooted in interpretation. Over the centuries, this freeing of Scripture inevitably led to new sets of tradition – tradition different from that of the Roman Catholic Church, but tradition nevertheless.

The 20th century has seen a further development – biblical liberalism. Upset that Protestantism was also developing a constantly refined body of interpretations of Scripture, fundamentalists sought to return permanently to a non-interpretive state of direct acceptance of the word of God. It didn't work. Now, there are thousands of Protestant denominations and non-denominational churches, each with their own understanding of the Bible.

The Roman Catholic tradition is rooted in the belief that a full understanding of Scripture is impossible outside the tradition. Scripture itself is

interpretive – it includes some things and leaves out many.

John concludes his Gospel by admitting that he has interpreted Jesus' life: "There are also many other things that Jesus did: if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (21:25). John chose which aspects of Jesus' life to include in his Gospel based on what he believed the Christian community of his day needed to know.

Moreover, the church spent centuries discussing which writings were divinely inspired before it decided which would be included in the Bible. Once the canon of Scripture had been determined, learned writers continued combating errors of interpretation. This period of the early church fathers began the process of developing church doctrine in opposition to faulty interpretations – heresies – which arise. But it was the church which unearthed and defined the meaning inherent in Scripture. Scripture does not stand alone.

To restrict our reading of Scripture to its literal sense is to cheat ourselves of the full spiritual wealth contained in the holy books. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* distinguishes three senses beyond the literal in which we can and ought to read Scripture in order to grasp the fullness of its message (see nos. 116-117).

For example, we can read the story of Moses leading the people out of Egypt as an historical account. But the early church fathers wrote that the story should not be left at that level. We ought to see the Old Testament as containing "prefigurations of what (God) accomplished in the fullness of time in the person of his incarnate Son" (*Catechism*, 128).

One of the earliest fathers, Tertullian, wrote that, "When the people, willingly leaving Egypt, escaped from the power of the King of Egypt by passing across the water, the water destroyed the king and all his army. What could be a clearer figure of baptism? The peoples are delivered from the world, and this is done by the water, and the devil, who has hitherto tyrannized over them, they leave behind, destroyed in the water."

Tertullian's account of the exodus is highly interpretive. But its interpretation leads us to a deeper understanding both of the exodus and of baptism.

The French Jesuit, Jean Danielou, showed how the early church fathers constantly used the Old Testament to unpack the meaning of the New. His conclusion: "The deeds of Christ are charged with biblical memories which tell us the true significance of these deeds" (*The Bible and the Liturgy*, p. 7). The catechism makes the same point: "The New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New" (no. 129).

In short, we cheat ourselves of the vast wealth of spiritual resources in the Bible if we limit it to its literal meaning.

The Catholic doctrinal tradition unearths that wealth from beneath the literal meaning of Scripture. To be sure, this task of unearthing is a perilous one, one which has many potential pitfalls. That is why we need the sure guidance of the church's magisterium to guarantee that our reading of the Bible is not a mere projection of our own biases onto the Scriptural text.

One more thing needs to be said. Fundamentalists read the Bible and read it often. We can hardly hope to go deeper than they do in our understanding unless we too read Scripture regularly. We

cannot have access to biblical treasures unless we dig for them.