

# **What Does the Church Teach about Interpreting the Bible?**

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## Introduction

Sacred scripture is shared by all Christian denominations, but often is a source of division among us. Since the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century some Protestants and Catholics have been arguing on how to interpret Sacred Scripture. Today 33% of adult American Christians (especially in fundamentalist or evangelical denominations) believe every single word in the Bible is factually true, whereas the official teaching of the Catholic Church is that divine inspiration protects as free from error those teachings of the Bible that are essential for our eternal salvation, but not every single word since humans did the actual writing and sometimes used metaphors or stories to convey these truths – not scientific or historical facts in every case.

## Early Christianity

Many early Christian writers had received classical educations in Greek philosophy and science and respected what the human mind had discovered. Their scientific knowledge was limited compared to what we know today but they had insight as to the regularity of natural laws and the movement of the planets. They believed God worked in both nature and in scripture and both should inform each other. They also had a keen sense that some of the biblical accounts were stories to teach moral or religious lessons, not scientific or historical accounts.

Origen of Alexandria (185-284 CE) lived in the late second and early third centuries and was trained both in Greek philosophy and Greek science before becoming a Christian. He was convinced that scripture needed to be interpreted not only literally in some places but allegorically in other parts. In his work, “On First Principles,” he explains the

difference between a bodily or literal meaning of scriptural passages and from a spiritual or allegorical one, the latter of which he believes the Creation Story in Genesis represents:

. . . Now what person of intelligence will believe that the first and second and the third day, and the evening and the morning existed without the sun and the moon and stars? And that the first day, if we may call it, was even without a heaven? And who is so silly as to believe that God after the manner of a farmer ‘planted a paradise eastward in Eden’ and set in it a visible and touchable ‘tree of life,’ of which a sort if anyone who tasted its fruit with his bodily teeth would gain life; and again that one could partake of ‘good and evil’ by chewing the fruit taken from the tree of that name? And when God is said to ‘walk in the paradise in the cool of the day’ and Adam to hide himself behind a tree, I do not think anyone will doubt that these are figurative expressions which indicate certain mysteries through a semblance of history and not through actual events . . . . .

.....  
..... For our contention with regard to the whole of divine scripture is, that it all has a spiritual meaning, but not all a bodily [literal] meaning; for the bodily meaning is often proved to be an impossibility. Consequently, the person who reads the divine books reverently, believing them to be divine writings, must exercise great care.

St. Augustine (354-430 CE) a century later in his work On the Literal Meaning of Genesis (De Genesis ad litteram libri duodecim) gave advice to Christians of his time as to how one should read the Creation account in Genesis – namely, allegorically, as argued by Origen. He also observed that it is “reckless and incompetent” for teachers of scripture to teach something that clearly science contradicted since this would make Christianity look incredible and discredit it in the eyes of nonbelieving educated people (emphases mine):

Usually, even a non-Christian knows something about the earth, the heavens, and the other elements of this world, about the motion and orbit of the stars and even their size and relative positions, about the predictable eclipses of the sun and moon, the cycles of the years and the seasons, about the kinds of animals, shrubs, stones, and so forth, and this knowledge he holds to as being certain from reason and experience. Now, it is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking nonsense on these topics; and we should take all means to prevent such an embarrassing situation, in which people show up vast ignorance in a Christian and laugh it to scorn. The shame is not so much that an ignorant individual is derided, but that people outside the household of faith think our sacred writers held such opinions, and, to the great loss of those for whose salvation we toil, the writers of our Scripture are criticized and rejected as unlearned men. If they find a Christian mistaken in a field which they

themselves know well and hear him maintaining his foolish opinions about our books, how are they going to believe those books in matters concerning the resurrection of the dead, the hope of eternal life, and the kingdom of heaven, when they think their pages are full of falsehoods and on facts which they themselves have learnt from experience and the light of reason? **Reckless and incompetent expounders of Holy Scripture bring untold trouble and sorrow on their wiser brethren when they are caught in one of their mischievous false opinions and are taken to task by those who are not bound by the authority of our sacred books. For then, to defend their utterly foolish and obviously untrue statements, they will try to call upon Holy Scripture for proof and even recite from memory many passages which they think support their position, although *they understand neither what they say nor the things about which they make assertion.*** [1 Timothy 1.7]

For these early educated Christian leaders science and scriptural stories went hand in hand but were different mediums of expression. St. Augustine also said God spoke to us in two books – the book of nature (which He created) and the book of scriptures (which He inspired). The truths in each book, however, were not in the same category of knowledge for these early Christian writers. The truths of scripture are not in every literal word but in the overall message of salvation whereas scientific knowledge gives a more accurate factual account of the workings of the material world. Scripture gives us the why of creation, science describes the how.

### Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

Luther and Calvin during the Reformation focused very much on the literal meaning of scripture in order to uphold the ultimate authority of the Bible. They too, however, recognized that not everything in scripture – especially some of the stories – were to be taken literally. They spoke of the “principle of accommodation” which means that in order to

communicate with ancient people writers sometimes used language the people could comprehend but which were not literal fact. References to God as having a body with limbs (as noted in the Creation story) for them was such an example. The Protestant approach to biblical interpretation during the Reformation allowed a certain amount of poetic license to writers of scripture so as to present religious truths in nontechnical language for the average lay person of ancient times to understand

In his commentary on Genesis, John Calvin urged a “common usage” understanding of the language in the story:

Moses wrote in a popular style things which, without Instruction, all ordinary persons endued with common sense, are able to understand; but astronomers investigate with great labour whatever the sagacity of the human mind can comprehend. Nevertheless, this study is not to be reprobated, nor this science to be condemned. . . . Moses,

therefore, rather adapts his discourse to common usage

The controversy in the Catholic Church with Galileo in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century resulted in a pause in this flexible method of interpreting biblical accounts that had long become the tradition in Christianity. Galileo with his new telescope claimed he had conclusive proof that a heliocentric understanding of the solar system was correct -- namely, that the earth moved around the sun, not vice versa. This contradicted stories in scripture -- e.g., when the text claimed that God sun stopped in its rotation to extend the day and allow the Jews to conquer the Gibeonites in Joshua 10:12-14.

The Vatican did not proclaim Galileo wrong since it had taken no official stance towards similar claims made by Copernicus two centuries before. After the Reformation, however, the Catholic Church was very sensitive to Protestant charges that it did not take the Bible seriously enough. More significantly Rome was also very sensitive to any challenges to Church

authority after the Reformation and the Council of Trent (1545-1563) had reinforced supreme authority in the pope. It was a time when anything that smacked of a challenge to Rome was seen as a furthering of Reformation ideas inside Catholicism.

The Vatican did not say Galileo was wrong but rather asked him not to publish his findings as definitive until more data was available. Galileo refused and insisted his findings were proof enough of the heliocentric view. He also publicly chided Vatican officials for not following their own theology and tradition in accepting for non-literal sections of scripture to allow for new scientific discoveries. For disobedience (and most likely for lecturing clerics on theology) he was silenced, but the Vatican never definitively claimed his theories were wrong or that the biblical account in Joshua had to be taken as literal truth.

### Nineteenth Century

What happened to change this understanding of the relationship between science and religion in

Christianity? It occurred only in recent times – in the late nineteenth century as a reaction to the emergence of some new challenges to Christianity coming from scientific and intellectual developments.

Darwin's discovery of evolution challenged the veracity of the seven days of creation and separate creation of individual species by explaining the process of natural selection and adaptation over millennia in accounting for their development. Moreover, modern biblical scholarship was emerging ("higher criticism") that argued that stories in the bible were not unique but sometimes had earlier origins in other cultures – e.g. flood story in Genesis about Noah and the ark had been circulating in various forms in early Middle Eastern cultures before it appeared in the Bible, and the ten commandments of Moses had definite similarities with earlier the law code of Babylonian King Hammurabi.

Challenges to Christianity had occurred before in history but the ones in the nineteenth century were formidable and stimulated concern among many

Christians about the relevance of their faith and respect for biblical teachings. Instead of returning to the insights of the early church fathers and Reformation leaders to accommodate these discoveries by re-emphasizing the allegorical nature of some biblical stories, a number of Protestant theologians -- predominantly in the United States -- “circled the wagons” against what they considered an all-out frontal attack on the authority of the Bible. They insisted on an absolute literal reading of the biblical stories so as to protect the bible’s spiritual message, not separating the literal and the allegorical as had been done traditionally in Christianity. This is when Christian fundamentalism emerged.

Leading Protestant American theologians at Princeton Theological Seminary starting in the 1880s argued that every word of scripture was divinely inspired. The bible was in their view “absolutely errorless” and everything in the bible was “truth to the facts.”

They believed they could approach the bible rationally and scientifically. One of them, Charles Hodge, claimed that:

“the Bible is to the theologian what nature is to the man of science. It is his store-house of facts; and his method of ascertaining what the Bible teaches, is the same as that which the natural philosopher adopts to ascertain what nature teaches.”

They rejected what they termed allegorical or “mystical,” interpretations that had characterized biblical theology up to this point and called for a more objective reading of texts as completely factual since that was the only “scientific” way to do so. The events in the bible were all factual and the literal method of interpretation was a rational and empirical way to understand them. They believed they were adapting “scientific” methods in theology to refute challenges from natural science to scripture.

The call by the Princeton theologians for a strictly literal interpretation of all biblical stories culminated

in the adoption of the Five Fundamentals of Christianity at the Presbyterian General Assembly in 1910, the first of which is a strict verbal (word for word) understanding of divine inspiration in scripture, rejecting the position long held in Christianity that the basic message of salvation is due to divine inspiration in the bible but not every historical detail or narrative. Thus began what has come to be called Christian fundamentalism that had not existed before.

The rejection of the tools of higher or biblical criticism to understand the Bible and of Darwin's discovery of evolution had significant influence not only in Presbyterian churches in the USA but also in Baptist, Disciples of Christ, and sectors of Episcopalians and Methodists as well.

Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, Bob Jones University in North Carolina and Liberty Baptist College in Virginia, all founded in the early and mid-twentieth century, have continued this relatively new development in Christianity of defending a literal

interpretation of biblical stories in training Protestant divinity school students and future pastors.

### The Position of the Catholic Church

As a counterpoint to the emergence of Christian fundamentalism's staunch defense of word-for word biblical inerrancy, starting in the 1940's the Vatican officially accepted the tools of modern biblical scholarship in the papal encyclical, "Under the Inspiration of the Holy Spirit," ("Divino Afflante Spiritu," 1943). In this pronouncement Pope Pius XII agreed that the scholarship can help uncover the cultural factors explaining the origins, meanings and literary forms of biblical texts.

This position was reiterated by the Second Vatican Council in 1965 in its "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation" ("Verbum Dei"). This document upheld the principle of divinely revealed religious truths necessary for salvation in scripture, but accepted literary and poetic forms of expression conditioned by the culture of the times of the author:

the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted to put into sacred writings (5) for the sake of salvation. . . . However, since God speaks in Sacred Scripture through men in human fashion, (6) the interpreter of Sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words.

To search out the intention of the sacred writers, attention should be given, among other things, to “literary forms.” For truth is set forth and expressed differently in texts which are variously historical, prophetic, poetic, or of other forms of discourse. The interpreter must investigate what meaning the sacred writer intended to express and actually expressed in particular circumstances by using contemporary literary forms in accordance with the situation of his own time and culture. (7) For the correct understanding of what the sacred author wanted to assert,

due attention must be paid to the customary and characteristic styles of feeling, speaking and narrating which prevailed at the time of the sacred writer, and to the patterns men normally employed at that period in their everyday dealings with one another.

Today in the United States fundamentalist and evangelical Christianity are strong influences in American religious thinking. Despite the widespread level of basic education in science in public schools and the acceptance symbolical methods of interpreting biblical stories prevalent in most mainline Protestant and the Catholic Church a substantial number of adults still hold to a strict literal interpretation of the Creation Story in Genesis and reject evolution.

In a March and April 2013 in a random survey of American adults the Pew Research Religion & Public Life Project found that 33% of American Christians reject the idea of evolution, saying that “humans and other living things have existed in their present form since the beginning of time.” Approximately two-thirds (64%) of white evangelical Protestants [including fundamentalists] hold this position as do

half of Black Protestants (50%) whereas only a quarter of Catholics (26%) and one-sixth of Mainline Protestants (15%) espouse this position.

Dr. John Dominic Crossan, professor emeritus of Comparative Religion at DePaul University in Chicago, affirms that the ancients had a more accurate understanding of biblical texts than some Christians today who insist only on a literal method of interpretation. The early Christian theologians appreciated the genre in which scripture was written and focused on the underlying moral and spiritual message in stories, whereas fundamentalists today insist on the literalness of every word and thus misunderstand the character and meaning of the original stories.

This approach also can seriously distract readers from searching for the deeper truths in scriptural e stories—perennial moral and spiritual values that are not time-bound, and also understand them as different from scientific explanations of the world. Sacred Scriptures are to help us think more deeply about issues in life

that science cannot deal with – the purpose of life, the ways of God with the human heart, and how humans should respond.

### Tools of Modern Biblical Scholarship

Some of the tools of modern biblical scholarship that the Catholic Church endorses in order to get to the original meaning of biblical texts are the following:

Examination of the meaning of the original language (Hebrew and Greek)

Literary analysis of the language and forms of writing used by the authors in their time

Historical context in which the text was written and audience for which it was intended

### Examples of applying these tools to biblical texts:

-Genesis chapters 1 and 2 – 2 creation stories sewed together from two oral traditions

- Use of the word “day” in Genesis 1 can connote a long period of time

The term may refer to an era ( [Matt 24:37](#) ) or to the span of human history ( [Gen 8:22](#) ), or specify a memorable event ( [Isa 9:4](#) ) or a significant time ( [Zep 1:14-16](#) ). The term often has a metaphorical meaning. A "day" is important largely for what fills it rather than for its chronological dimension.

<https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/day/>

- 1 Corinthians 11:3 and 14:34 – Paul seemingly contradicting himself about women preaching – women may “prophesy,” or teach, in 1 Cor 11:3 but in 14:34 they are to remain “silent” (Greek word he uses: *lallein*= informal conversation)
- 1 Timothy 2:11-15 – women shall have no authority over a man and will be saved by childbirth (theology is not Pauline, written later when women teachers no longer existed)