

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

The Challenge of (Protestant) “Fundamentalism”

- Five “Fundamentals” of 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 *simplicistic* answers to complex questions; people crave *certainty*, don’t like complexity or ambiguity

Five Principles of Catholic Biblical Interpretation

1. **“Both/And” Approach** (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”)
2. **Incarnational Principle** (vs. bibliolatry, over-emphasis on the Bible as text)
 - 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 (when God *speaks*, things happen; cf. Gen 1)
 - Word made Flesh (God speaks to us in *human* languages, despite their *limitations*)
3. **Ecclesial Guidance** (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** (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** (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**:
 - Literal/Historical Content (*original meaning*) *and* Spiritual/Theological Content (*enduring meaning*)
 - Essential Role of **Context**:
 - 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: Encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943)
- **Second Vatican Council**: “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation”: **Dei Verbum** (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)

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 obviously be false to claim both “God is Love” and also “God is not Love,” for example, or “Jesus is divine” and “Jesus is not divine.”

However, just as every coin has *both* a “heads” *and* a “tails” side, just as every battery has *both* a “positive” *and* a “negative” terminal, and just as the earth has *both* a North Pole *and* a South Pole, so also there are always (at least) two “sides” or “poles” to the Catholic-Christian answer to any theological question. These opposite poles 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 “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 anything or anyone be *both* divine *and* human? 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 should be	<i>both</i>	Read Spiritually	<i>and</i>	Studied Academically
The Christian Bible contains	<i>both</i>	Old Testament	<i>and</i>	New Testament
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 Community 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)

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.

Official Roman Catholic Teachings on the Bible

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

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: America Press, 1966.
- Austin Flannery, O.P. *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents*. Rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 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: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994; 2nd edition, 2000.
- **Online** at [Vatican Website](#) or [USCCB](#) or [St. Charles Borromeo](#).

Overview and Analysis:

A) Concerning the Sacred Scriptures, the most recent document with the highest level of authority in the Catholic Church is called the “**Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation**,” often referred to by its Latin title, *Dei Verbum* (*DV*), which was officially promulgated on November 18, 1964, by the bishops meeting at the Second Vatican Council. A more recent summary of the Church’s official teachings is the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (*CCC*, 1983). Not only does the *Catechism* clearly present the same teachings as *Dei Verbum*, but the structure of this *CCC* chapter closely parallels the structure of *DV*:

1. **Article 1** of this portion of the *CCC* (§§51-73) expands upon the teachings of chapter 1 of *DV*.
2. **Article 2** of the *CCC* (§§74-100) further develops the material presented in chapter 2 of *DV*.
3. **Article 3** of the *CCC* (§§101-141) summarizes the main points of chapters 3-6 of *DV*.

B) Official Catholic teachings about the Bible do not deal immediately with the written scriptures, but begin from a much broader perspective, first presenting the Church’s teachings about “**The Revelation of God**.” In Catholic understanding, divine revelation is much *more* than just the Bible; it is also *more* than God revealing verbal messages to humanity. Rather, it is the entire process by which God reveals or expresses Himself in our world, what we might call “God’s self-revelation.” Moreover, this process of divine revelation can be seen in four main historical stages:

1. God’s self-revelation in **creation**, in everything that exists in the universe, from inanimate material, to plants and animals, in what we today call “nature.”
2. God’s self-revelation in and to the **human race**, who are not only “created in God’s image and likeness” (see Gen 1:26-27), but who are endowed with reason, which gives us the ability to know God.
3. God’s election of and special revelation to the **people of Israel**, giving them more direct knowledge about God and the world, 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 sending of **Jesus Christ**, “the Word made flesh” (see John 1:14), who through his words and actions reveals even more clearly everything we need to know about God and our world, about life and love, about forgiveness and salvation.

C) After presenting the broader concept of “Revelation,” but before addressing the written scriptures, Catholic teachings explain “**The Transmission of Divine Revelation**,” that is, the process by which God’s revelation is “transmitted” or “handed down” or “passed on” (Latin *traditio*) through the ages. Again, this is a complex process involving several different stages or steps, which one must carefully distinguish from one another. The following stages apply both in the OT era and in the NT era:

1. **Historical Events:** the actions of the patriarchs, prophets, kings, and all the people of Israel (in the OT era), or the actions of Jesus, his own disciples and apostles (in the NT era).
2. **Oral Traditions:** the stories about what happened, and the teachings of various people, as passed down from one generation to the next, often by anonymous people.
3. **Written Documents:** the various books of Moses, the prophets, and teachers of Israel (in the OT); and the recorded Gospels, letters, and other writings of early Christian leaders (in the NT).
4. **Canonization and Interpretation:** the “transmission” of God’s revelation did not end with the writing of the individual books of the Bible, but continues in the activity of the Church, first in collecting and “canonizing” the collections of scriptures we now call the Old and New Testaments, as well as in the ongoing teaching, interpretation, and application of God’s revelation in the lives of individuals and communities throughout the centuries.

D) Only after understanding the Catholic Christian teachings about Revelation and Tradition can we also come to a proper understanding of the Church’s teachings about the Bible, the Sacred Scriptures. Only now can we properly see the intertwined relationships between **Scripture, Tradition, and Revelation**:

1. Contrary to the polemical Reformation-era debates (and popular misunderstandings still today!), “Scripture” and “Tradition” are *not opposed* to each other; they are *not* two separate entities. Rather, “Scripture” (the written Bible) is *part* of the larger reality called “Tradition” (the transmission of divine truth), which is itself part of the larger process called “Revelation” (or better, “God’s self-revelation”). Expressed with mathematical symbols, one might say **Scripture < Tradition < Revelation**.
2. Although the Bible is a very old and crucial part of Church Tradition, handing on God’s Revelation, it is *not the only part*. Much of God’s self-revelation has been and continues to be handed on to humanity through other aspects of the Church’s Tradition (esp. the liturgy), and even more broadly in various ways. Put differently, although the Scriptures contain Revelation, not all of God’s self-revelation is recorded in the Bible (since God has revealed and continues to reveal Himself in nature, people, and many other ways).
3. However, since **the Bible** contains the indispensable “core” of God’s Revelation, so to speak, Christians believe that *no other revelations* would ever change or contradict what God teaches us in and through the Old and New Testaments. Moreover, as the core of Revelation, the Bible contains all the truths necessary for our redemption and salvation, so that we neither seek nor need any other revelation to supplement or complete God’s revelation as found in the Scriptures.
4. It is also crucial to understand that the Word of God, in Catholic understanding, is not primarily the Bible (the written text), but is **Jesus Christ** (the incarnate Word). The most important part of Christian faith is *not the Bible, but Jesus* himself. Jesus came *before* the Bible (before the NT books were written, and before the complete scriptures were canonized).
5. **The Church** also came *before* the Bible! Not only did the oral preaching of the apostles precede the writing of the NT books (by several decades), but it was the early Church that determined the Canon of the Bible (not until several centuries after Jesus’ life).

E) Chapter 3 of *DV* (and the corresponding paragraphs of *CCC*), also summarize the Catholic Christian teachings about the “divine inspiration” of the **Scriptures** and their proper interpretation. In contrast to a naïve fundamentalistic view of biblical authorship, which sometimes reduces the role of biblical writers to little more than dictation machines, Catholic understanding of the “divine inspiration” of the Bible is a good example of the Church’s overall **BOTH/AND** approach to theology:

1. The Bible is *both* the Word of God *and* written in human languages. One can properly say *both* that God is the author of the scriptures *and* that the human writers acted as real authors. They did not merely record the exact words whispered into their ears by the Holy Spirit (as graphically portrayed in much medieval art), but rather made use of their own human abilities in writing their texts (under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, of course).
2. Because the Bible is written in *human* languages (indeed, *ancient* languages very different from our own!), the proper interpretation of the Scriptures requires not only that we are aware of the limitations of all human language (and the difficulties of translation from one language to another), but also that we pay attention to the various literary forms and modes of expression used by the ancient authors.
3. The “inspiration” of the Holy Spirit applies not only to one stage, but to all stages in the long process of the transmission of divine revelation. Not only were Moses, the prophets, Jesus, the apostles, and other biblical characters inspired by the Holy Spirit in their words and actions; not only were the biblical authors inspired by God’s Spirit as they were busy writing; not only was the Church leaders inspired by the Spirit when they selected which books to include in the biblical canon. Rather, the Holy Spirit was active at all these stages of the process.
4. Finally, the Holy Spirit continues to guide the Christian Church in the correct understanding and proper application of the scriptures for our own lives in community and as individuals. Although this goes beyond the traditional doctrine of the “divine inspiration of sacred scripture,” one can properly say that the Holy Spirit still actively guides the Church in its use of the scriptures in many ways: in liturgical prayer, in small-group discussions, in personal prayer and study, and in many other facets of our individual and communal lives.

Biblical References: Format & Examples

Purpose:

For clarity and precision in biblical writing, always *back up* all of your claims with brief but *specific references* to the biblical texts, citing the appropriate book names followed by the chapter and verse numbers:

- Follow the examples in good biblical textbooks or commentaries to learn how to cite scriptural references properly.
- List specific references *not only* when you directly quote a text, *but also* when you mention specific biblical passages.
- Biblical references are usually put at the *end* of the sentence (in parentheses), *followed by* the concluding punctuation.
- References are given in the middle of a sentence (*without* parentheses) if they are part of what you are claiming.
- Use "see" or "cf." if you want your reader to "see" or "compare" what you have said with similar or contrasting texts.
- Use "e.g." when you mean "for example"; use "par." to refer to "parallel" passages in other biblical books (esp. Gospels).
- Spell out the full names of biblical books when they appear in your text, but use the standard short *American abbreviations* for biblical books in your references (see *HarperCollins Study Bible*, xxxi; or *Catholic Study Bible*, xii -- note that the American system normally does not use italics or periods in biblical abbreviations).
- Note that the punctuation is slightly different in the European system of biblical references (explained in the chart below).
- You can omit the abbreviated name of a biblical book after the first reference if you are obviously still referring to the same book; but if you are dealing with more than one book, include the names to make all references clear.

Some Examples:

- Have you read the parables of Jesus, such as the famous parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37)?
- The Gospel according to Mark is the first Christian text that uses the word "gospel" or "good news" (1:1).
- The death of Jesus is briefly but powerfully described in the Fourth Gospel: "When Jesus had received the wine, he said, 'It is finished.' Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit" (John 19:30).
- Matthew usually uses the phrase "Kingdom of Heaven" rather than "Kingdom of God" (e.g., Matt 3:2; 4:17; 5:3; etc.; but cf. 6:33; 12:28; 19:24; 21:31, 43).
- The feeding of the 5000 is found in all four canonical Gospels (Mark 6:32-44; par. Matt 14:13-21; Luke 9:10b-17; John 6:1-15).
- John's Gospel begins with the same two words as the LXX Greek version of Genesis (cf. John 1:1 and Gen 1:1).

Format Standards for the American System of Biblical References:

- Use **colons** between chapter and verse numbers (most Europeans use a different format, putting commas here).
- Use **commas** between verse numbers of the same chapter (and between chapter numbers, but only if no verses are given).
- Use **semicolons** between references that give chapter and verse numbers from different chapters.
- Use a **single dash** between verses to indicate "from-to" within one chapter (or between chapter numbers without verses).
- Use a **longer dash** to indicate "from--to" between different chapters (with or without spaces, does not matter much).
- Do **not** use periods after abbreviated book names, but **do** put spaces between the abbreviations and chapter numbers.

American Abbr.	Biblical Passage	European Abbr.
John 9	The Gospel according to John, chapter 9	John 9
John 9, 12	John, chapters 9 <i>and</i> 12 (two chapters only)	John 9; 12
John 9–12	John, chapters 9 <i>through</i> 12 (four chaps. total)	John 9–12
John 9:12	John, chapter 9, verse 12 (only one verse)	John 9,12
John 9:12b	John, chapter 9, only the second part of verse 12	John 9,12b
John 9:1, 12	John, chapter 9, verses 1 <i>and</i> 12 only	John 9,1.12
John 9:1-12	John, chapter 9, the passage <i>from</i> verse 1 <i>to</i> verse 12	John 9,1-12
John 9:1-12, 36	John, chapter 9, <i>from</i> verse 1 <i>to</i> verse 12, <i>and</i> verse 36	John 9,1-12.36
John 9:1; 12:36	John, only the two verses 9:1 <i>and</i> 12:36	John 9,1; 12,36
John 9:1–12:36	John, the whole section <i>from</i> 9:1 <i>to</i> 12:36	John 9,1—12,36
John 9:1-12; 12:3-6	John, the two <i>passages</i> 9:1-12 <i>and</i> 12:3-6	John 9,1-12; 12,3-6
John 9:1-3, 6-12; 12:3-6	three passages: John 9:1-2; and 9:6-12; and John 12:3-6	John 9,1-3.6-12; 12,3-6
John 9:12-13	John, chapter 9, verses 12 and 13 ("12 and following")	John 9,12f
[<i>not used; better to list exact verse #s</i>]	John, chapter 9, verse 12 "and the following verses"; <i>but how many? the end of the text is not specified!</i>	John 9,12ff

Caution: Be careful not to get books with similar names or abbreviations mixed up (Ex vs. Ez vs. Ezr)!

Biblical Book Abbreviations

#	OT Book Name	Abbreviations	#	OT Book Name	Abbreviations
1	Genesis	Gen , Ge, Gn	25	Ecclesiastes <i>or</i> Qoheleth	Eccl , Eccles, Ec <i>or</i> Qoh
2	Exodus	Exod , Ex			
3	Leviticus	Lev , Lv, Le	26	Song of Songs <i>or</i> Canticle of Canticles	Song , SS, So, Sg <i>or</i> Cant , Can
4	Numbers	Num , Nm, Nu			
5	Deuteronomy	Deut , Dt, De, Du	27	Wisdom (of Solomon)	Wis , Ws
6	Joshua	Josh , Jos, Jo	28	Sirach <i>or</i> Ecclesiasticus	Sir <i>or</i> Ecclus
7	Judges	Judg , Jdg, Jgs	29	Isaiah	Isa , Is
8	Ruth	Ruth , Ru	30	Jeremiah	Jer , Je
9	1 Samuel	1 Sam , 1Sm, 1Sa	31	Lamentations	Lam , La
10	2 Samuel	2 Sam , 2Sm, 2Sa	32	Baruch	Bar , Ba
11	1 Kings	1 Kgs , 1Kg, 1Ki	33	Ezekiel	Ezek , Ezk, Ez
12	2 Kings	2 Kgs , 2Kg, 2Ki	34	Daniel	Dan , Dn, Da
13	1 Chronicles	1 Chr , 1Chron, 1Ch	35	Hosea	Hos , Ho
14	2 Chronicles	2 Chr , 2Chron, 2Ch	36	Joel	Joel , Joe, Jl
15	Ezra	Ezra , Ezz	37	Amos	Amos , Am
16	Nehemiah	Neh , Ne	38	Obadiah	Obad , Ob
17	Tobit	Tob , Tb	39	Jonah	Jonah , Jon
18	Judith	Jdt , Jth	40	Micah	Mic , Mi
19	Esther	Esth , Est, Es	41	Nahum	Nah , Na
20	1 Maccabees	1 Macc , 1Mc, 1Ma	42	Habakkuk	Hab , Hb
21	2 Maccabees	2 Macc , 2Mc, 2Ma	43	Zephaniah	Zeph , Zep
22	Job	Job , Jb	44	Haggai	Hag , Hg
23	Psalms	Ps (pl. Pss)	45	Zechariah	Zech , Zec
24	Proverbs	Prov , Prv, Pr	46	Malachi	Mal , Ml

#	NT Book Name	Abbreviations	#	NT Book Name	Abbreviations
1	Matthew	Matt , Mat, Mt	15	1 Timothy	1 Tim , 1 Tm, 1Ti, 1T
2	Mark	Mark , Mar, Mk	16	2 Timothy	2 Tim , 2 Tm, 2Ti, 2T
3	Luke	Luke , Lk, Lu	17	Titus	Titus , Tit, Ti
4	John	John , Jn, Jo	18	Philemon	Phlm , Philem, Phm
5	Acts of the Apostles	Acts , Ac	19	Hebrews	Heb , He
6	Romans	Rom , Rm, Ro	20	James	Jas , Ja
7	1 Corinthians	1 Cor , 1 Co, 1C	21	1 Peter	1 Pet , 1 Pt, 1P
8	2 Corinthians	2 Cor , 2 Co, 2C	22	2 Peter	2 Pet , 2 Pt, 2P
9	Galatians	Gal , Ga	23	1 John	1 Jn , 1Jo, 1J
10	Ephesians	Eph , Ep	24	2 John	2 Jn , 2Jo, 2J
11	Philippians	Phil , Php	25	3 John	3 Jn , 3Jo, 3J
12	Colossians	Col , Co	26	Jude	Jude , Ju
13	1 Thessalonians	1 Thess , 1 Thes, 1Th	27	Revelation <i>or</i> Apocalypse	Rev , Re, Rv Apoc , Ap
14	2 Thessalonians	2 Thess , 2 Thes, 2Th			

Biblical Exegesis: An Introductory Overview

Introduction / Definitions:

- **Exegesis** – careful investigation of the original meaning of texts in their historical and literary contexts; the English word comes from a Greek verb meaning “to lead out of” (Greek “*ex*” = “out”; “*agein*” = “to lead/go/draw”); the process basically involves asking analytical questions about various aspects of the texts and their contexts
 - the opposite process is called *Eisegesis*, which means “reading [your own opinions] into” the text (*not* a good idea in biblical studies!)
- **Biblical Criticism / Critical Methods** – various ways of doing biblical exegesis; each has a specific goal and a specific set of questions; some methods are more historical, others more literary, others more sociological, theological, etc.
 - biblical “criticism” does not mean “criticizing” the text (i.e. what you don’t like or don’t agree with);
 - rather, it means asking “critical” questions, based on “criteria” that are as clear, careful, and objective as possible.
- **Hermeneutics** – the theory and methodology of interpretation, especially of scriptural texts; a branch of theology that deals with the principles underlying biblical exegesis.

Various Methods of Biblical Exegesis / Interpretation:

The following table lists many different approaches or methods of biblical interpretation, as grouped in the document “[The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church](#),” by the Pontifical Biblical Commission (1993).

A) The Historical-Critical Method	Questions Typically Asked:
Composition History Questions	Who is the author of the work? What do we know about him/her/them? Is the attributed author the actual author, or is the work pseudepigraphic? When, where, and under what circumstances was the work written? Who were the original recipients? Where did they live?
Traditional Literary Criticism	What words are used, and what range of meanings do they have? What images and symbols are used, and what do they signify? What characters appear in the story? What do we know about them? How are the characters related to one another in the story?
Comparison of Translations	Are there any significant differences between various modern translations? When were these translations done, using which translation philosophies? Which ancient Hebrew or Greek texts underlie the various translations? Has anything been lost or obscured in the process of translation?
Textual Criticism	Are there any variant readings in the ancient manuscripts? Are the variants negligible (mere spelling) or significant (affecting meaning)? Can the variants be explained as intentional changes, or as accidental ones? How do the literary or historical contexts help explain the variant readings?
Source Criticism	Does the text have any underlying source or sources? Which version of a source was used, in case there is more than one? What do the sources actually say and mean in their original contexts? How are the sources used (quoted, paraphrased, adapted?) in the later text?
Form Criticism	What is the literary form or “genre” of the whole work and the particular text? Does the text follow or diverge from the usual expectations for this genre? What is the normal purpose/goal of this genre? In what social context would texts of this genre have been used?
Redaction Criticism	How has the author used the source(s) in shaping this text? Are there any parallel texts, and how is this text similar and/or different? What particular views or theological emphases does this author show? How did the author’s life circumstances affect the shaping of the text?
Socio-Historical Criticism	If the story claims to be historical, what really happened? What social, historical, or cultural information can be gleaned from the text? What background information is necessary to better understand the text? What was life like for the common people, not just the ruling elites?

B) New Methods of Literary Analysis	Questions Typically Asked:
Rhetorical Analysis	What message is the author trying to convey? Is the author attempting to instruct, inspire, defend, or persuade the reader? What rhetorical techniques does he use to achieve his goals?
Narrative Analysis	Who are the characters in the story? What roles do they play? What is the plot sequence? What narrative time is covered? What is the author's and/or narrator's point of view?
Semiotic Analysis	What deeper patterns of meaning are conveyed by the words and symbols?
C) Approaches Based on Tradition	Questions Typically Asked:
Canonical Approach	Where does this text belong in the literary context of the entire Bible? How is this text related to prior texts and/or later texts in the Bible? How does its location in the Canon affect the meaning of this text?
Using Jewish Interpretative Traditions	How do traditional Jewish methods of interpretation read this text? Are there any parallel or similar stories in Rabbinic literature? Do Jewish and Christian interpretations of this text differ significantly?
History of Interpretation (<i>Wirkungsgeschichte</i>)	How was this text interpreted by the "Church Fathers" and in later centuries? Is the text interpreted differently by various churches and denominations? How has the text been interpreted in art, music, liturgy, and popular culture?
D) Apps. Using the Human Sciences	Questions Typically Asked:
Sociological Approach	What insights from Sociology can help in the interpretation of the text? What patterns of human social behavior are evident in the text?
Cultural Anthropology Approach	What models from Cultural Anthropology can help us understand the text? What cultural presuppositions/patterns affect the interpretation of the text?
Psychological/Psychoanalytical Apps.	How can the text be interpreted using various theories from Psychology? Can the text help us understand the human psyche better?
E) Contextual Approaches	Questions Typically Asked:
Liberationist Approach	Has this text been used for domination of oppressed people? How? Can this text be used for the liberation of the poor/disadvantaged? How? Can other texts counteract the detrimental effects of oppressive texts?
Feminist Approach	Does the text evidence gender bias? Was later interpretation also biased? How is the meaning of the text affected if read from a feminist perspective? What other texts can be recovered and used to balance out biased texts?

Methods of Exegesis/Interpretation	Advantages/Strengths of These Methods:	Disadvantages/Weaknesses of These Methods::
A) The Historical-Critical Method	.	.
B) New Methods of Literary Analysis	.	.
C) Approaches Based on Tradition	.	.
D) Approaches Using Human Sciences	.	.
E) Contextual Approaches	.	.
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The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church

Presented by the Pontifical Biblical Commission to Pope John Paul II on April 23, 1993

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Part I: Methods and Approaches for Interpretation; F. Fundamentalist Interpretation (PBC: IBC, 1983)

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" (*relectures*) 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.

A Glossary of Important Terms for Biblical Studies

Hebrew Bible (HB) - traditionally called the “**Old Testament**” (OT), now sometimes called the “**First Testament**.” A large collection of different “books” considered “canonical scriptures” by all Jews and Christians. Most are written in Hebrew (a few parts are in Aramaic), mostly between the 9th and 6th centuries BCE. While Jews count 24 books, Christians subdivide some of them to make a total of 39 books. Jews group them into three categories (Torah, Prophets, Writings), while Christians group them into four groups (Law, Historical Books, Wisdom Books, Prophetic Books):

Torah - also called the “Law” books, or the “**Pentateuch**” (Greek for “five scrolls”), or “The Five Books of Moses.”

These first five books of the HB (Gen, Exod, Lev, Num, Deut) are considered the “core” of the Bible by Jews.

Prophets - subdivided in Jewish Bibles into the “*Former Prophets*” (Josh, Judg, 1 & 2 Sam, 1 & 2 Kgs - considered “Historical Books” by Christians), and the “*Latter Prophets*” (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, & the “Twelve Minor Prophets” – note that Christians also count Daniel as one of the major Prophets, but Jews put Daniel in the following group).

Writings - includes the books of Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Solomon, Lamentations & Ecclesiastes (called “*Wisdom Literature*” by Christians today), and the books of Ruth, Esther, Ezra, Nehemiah, and 1 & 2 Chronicles (considered part of the “Historical Books” by Christians), as well as Daniel.

Septuagint (LXX) - the collection of 46 books of ancient Jewish Scriptures in Greek, including translations of all 39 books of the HB (Daniel, Esther & Jeremiah are longer in the Greek versions than in the original Hebrew), as well as the seven additional books (the “OT Apocrypha”) not found in the HB. The LXX was translated and compiled around 250 BCE, probably in or near Alexandria, Egypt; the name “Septuagint” (meaning “seventy”) is connected with the ancient Jewish tradition which claims that 70 scholars translated the whole thing in 70 days. The entire LXX was considered scripture by most Greek-speaking Jews and by early Christians.

OT Apocrypha / Deuterocanonical Books - seven books in the LXX but not in the HB (Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, 1 & 2 Maccabees - think of the mnemonic “T. J. McWEB”); they are *not* considered canonical by Jews and most Protestant Christians today, but *are* considered part of the biblical canon by Orthodox and Catholic Christians; some Orthodox Bibles also contain other books not considered canonical by Catholics.

Summary: LXX = ancient Greek translation of the HB *plus* the Apocrypha or Deuterocanonical Books.

Pseudepigrapha - refers broadly to other ancient Jewish writings which are not part of the HB nor of the LXX, but are often attributed to a biblical figure (e.g. Jubilees, 1 Enoch, the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, etc.). They were popular among ancient Jews, and thus are very valuable for historical purposes, even if they were never considered biblical.

Philo - an important Jewish writer who lived in Alexandria in the early first cent. CE (roughly contemporary with Jesus). He used Greek philosophical language and images to interpret Jewish biblical traditions (and vice-versa).

Josephus - the most important Jewish historian from the late first cent. CE. He was a general at the beginning of the First Jewish War against Rome, but surrendered early and then wrote a history of the “Jewish War.”

Rabbinic Literature - various collections of Jewish writings from the 3rd through 7th centuries CE, although they contain some traditions attributed to earlier rabbis, including some famous contemporaries of Jesus.

Caution: neither the Pseudepigrapha, nor the writings of Philo, Josephus, or the Rabbis are considered “biblical” by anyone!

New Testament (NT) - sometimes also called the “**Second Testament**,” especially by Jewish scholars. A collection of 27 early Christian writings composed in the late 1st and early 2nd centuries CE, and considered “biblical” or “canonical” by Christians since around the end of the second century; it consists of the following:

Gospels - early Christian narratives about the words and actions, the life and death of Jesus. The NT includes three “**Synoptic Gospels**” (Matthew, Mark, Luke - called “Synoptics” because they see Jesus more-or-less “with the same eye”) and the “**Fourth Gospel**” (John), all written between the late 60’s and early 90’s of the 1st century. The authors are usually called “**Evangelists**” (from Greek *Euangelion*, lit. “good news”).

Q-Source - a hypothetical collection of sayings & teachings of Jesus, now lost but most likely used by Matthew and Luke.

Acts of the Apostles - an early partial “history” of the spread of Christianity; the second volume to Luke’s Gospel.

Epistles or Letters - written by some of the early apostles to various Christian communities or individuals, including:

- 13 letters “**Attributed to Paul**” (Rom, 1 & 2 Cor, Gal, Eph, Phil, Col, 1 & 2 Thess, 1 & 2 Tim, Titus, Phlm),
- an anonymous sermon apparently written “**To the Hebrews**” (but *not* written by or attributed to Paul!),
- and 7 “**General Epistles**” or “**Catholic Epistles**” (James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1 & 2 & 3 John, Jude).

Note: The letters attributed to Paul are often subdivided into 7 “authentic” or “**undisputed Pauline Letters**” (Rom, 1 & 2 Cor, Gal, Phil, 1 Thess, Phlm - most scholars agree that Paul wrote these), and 6 “disputed” or “**Deutero-Pauline Letters**” (Col, Eph, 2 Thess, 1 & 2 Tim, Titus - some scholars think these were written by Paul; others argue they were written by Paul’s followers); three letters written to early “pastors” (1 & 2 Tim, Titus) are also called “**Pastoral Epistles**.”

Book of Revelation (not plural!) - also called “**The Apocalypse**.” A book containing seven short letters addressed to the “Churches of Asia,” and a long series of highly symbolic “visions” attributed to a certain man named “John.”

Caution on Possibly Ambiguous Terms:

Jewish Scriptures - refers either to the HB for Jews in the ancient or modern worlds who could speak or understand Hebrew, or to the LXX for Greek-speaking Jews and early Jewish Christians.

Greek Scriptures - refers either to the LXX alone for ancient Jews, or to the LXX and the NT for ancient Christians.

Christian Scriptures - refers not only to the NT, but also to the HB (and/or the LXX).

Bible - we usually think of it as one book, but it is really a collection of books (39 or 46 in the OT and 27 in the NT); the word comes from the Greek "*ta biblia*," which is a plural word meaning "books."

Scriptures - literally just means "writings," but always refers to religious writings considered sacred by some group

Canon - a fixed list of which books are considered part of the Bible; the word means "rule; measure; criterion."

biblical / scriptural / canonical - which books are considered part of the Bible depends on who you ask!!!; most ancient Hebrew-speaking Jews, all modern Jews and most Protestants include only the 39 books of the HB; but ancient Greek-speaking Jews, most early Christians and all Catholics and Orthodox Christians today use all 46 books of the LXX; all Christians since the 4th century CE consider the same 27 books to be part of the canonical NT.

non-canonical books - ancient writings which are not part of the Bible, including the OT Pseudepigrapha (Jewish), as well as many other early Christian writings (many also called Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Apocalypses).

Some Important Tools for Biblical Research:

Study Bible - an edition which prints not only the biblical text itself (as in a "Reader's Bible"), but also extensive "editorial material," including introductions, footnotes, cross-references, and appendices with maps, charts, time-lines, etc.

Bible Atlas - a book containing lots of maps and diagrams, and often also pictures and helpful discussions of biblical geography; good ones include the *Harpers Bible Atlas* and the *Macmillan Atlas of the Bible*.

Bible Commentary - a book of modern scholars' explanations of biblical texts, arranged in biblical order (book-by-book, chapter-by-chapter, verse-by-verse); it usually includes notes on items necessary for understanding the text (historical, geographical, linguistic, etc.), and a scholar's interpretation of its meaning (theological, rhetorical, and/or narrative); good one-volume commentaries covering the whole OT and NT include the *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* and the *Harpers Bible Commentary*; multi-volume commentary series go into much more depth on each biblical book.

Bible Dictionary - contains articles on most biblical names, places, images, themes, and other words in alphabetical order; the best ones currently available are the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (ABD; 6 vols.; 1992), the *Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible* (IDB: 4 vols. 1962; and IDBS: a "Supplement" vol. 1969), and the *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* (1996).

Concordance - a book listing all the passages in the Bible (OT and NT) in which a particular word is used; be careful when using English concordances, since a particular Hebrew or Greek word might be translated with various different English words; so always also look up related words and synonyms!

Parallel Bible - an edition which prints several English translations (often 4, 6, or 8 different ones! - and sometimes also the original Greek or Hebrew text) in parallel columns on the same pages so you can compare them easily; the texts follow the biblical order from Genesis to Revelation (or Matthew to Revelation if it covers only the NT).

Gospel Synopsis - a book which prints similar pericopes from the Gospels (only the Synoptics, or sometimes all 4 Gospels) in parallel columns on the same pages for easy comparison; it uses only one English translation (and/or Greek texts). Our *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* edited by K. Aland is based on the RSV (Revised Standard Version). Pericopes are arranged roughly from the beginning of Matt to the end of John, but since pericopes are in different orders in the Synoptics, and most of John's material is not in the Synoptics at all, many pericopes have to be printed out of order.

Interlinear Bible - an edition in which each line of the original biblical text (OT Hebrew or NT Greek) is followed by a line containing a literal English equivalent directly underneath each Hebrew or Greek word; since the word order of the ancient languages is very different from any modern languages, the English equivalents seem very strange, chopped up, and out of order; thus a smooth English translation is usually also provided in the margins.

Other Important Terms:

Genre - the literary form of a text; large genres include Gospels, Letters, Acts, Apocalypses, Novels, Biographies, etc.; smaller genres within the Gospels include parables, sayings, healing miracles, exorcisms, nature miracles, etc.

Pericope - an individual passage within the Gospels, with a distinct beginning and ending, so that it can be considered an independent unit; similar pericopes are often found in different places and different orders in the Synoptics.

Exegesis - the process of careful investigation of the meaning of the text in its original historical and literary contexts.

Criticisms - various methods of doing biblical exegesis; each has a specific goal and a specific set of questions it asks.

Primary Literature - ancient writings or sources -- vs. -- **Secondary Literature** - anything written by modern scholars.

Manuscripts - hand-written ancient texts, copies of copies -- vs. -- **Print Editions** - copies printed since Gutenberg (1456)

Ancient Versions - translations into ancient Coptic, Syriac, etc. -- vs. -- **Modern Translations** - English, Spanish, etc.

Papyrus - an Egyptian plant; a paper-like writing material made from it -- vs. -- **Vellum** - animal skins prepared for writing.

Scroll - long sheets written on one side only, then rolled-up -- vs. -- **Codex** - written on both sides, bound in book form.