1

UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

The Bible can be a lightning rod given how much diversity exists among Christians about how to read it. Catholics, Anglicans, Orthodox, Protestants, Evangelicals, Fundamentalists—they all understand and interpret the Bible differently. And that's not counting atheists, agnostics, or other Bible skeptics!

I'm sure you have had conversations about scripture with family and friends, even strangers online, finding yourself stuck after realizing that you both have very different views about the Bible. You struggle to explain how and why you interpret the Bible the way you do, but it falls flat.

Well, this chapter will help you solve that problem. As you study it, you will get clear and confident about how Catholics read, understand, and interpret scripture. You will learn

- the most important key to understanding the Bible;
- the four senses of scripture, a type of biblical interpretation unique to Catholicism;
- how to read "dark passages" of the Bible in the right light; and

- the differences between Catholic and Protestant interpretations of scripture.

When you finish the chapter, you will realize that you can explain the Bible to others in a way that makes sense.

THE MOST IMPORTANT KEY TO UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

When you read the Bible, background information is always valuable. For example, suppose you picked up the Gospel of Matthew. It would help you to know who Matthew was, his audience, the language he wrote in, and when he published his gospel. All of that background would help you make sense of what you're reading.

But the key piece of background information, the first and most important feature you need to determine, is the genre of what you're reading.

A Collection of Books

Many people talk about the Bible as if it were one, giant book. And that's understandable because the Bible is typically published as a single volume. The Bible looks like one book that contains seventy-three individual texts (or sixty-six if you have a Protestant Bible)—such as Genesis, the Psalms, and the gospels—all bound between two covers.

But that's not how the early church saw the Bible. For the first three hundred years of Christianity, no single, complete text known as "the Bible" existed. Each individual book of scripture circulated by itself or sometimes bundled

with a few others. Books, such as the Gospel of Mark or the letter of James, were each known in and of themselves. No Bible compiled all of them together.

The earliest complete Bible we're aware of, the *Codex Vaticanus*, dates to around AD 300 and was written in Greek. It seems to be the first time all the books of the Bible as we know it today, Old and New Testaments, were collected into one volume. And even then, the *Codex Vaticanus* does not include several long passages and a few of the New Testament books.

Why does it matter that the Bible is a collection of books rather than a single book? It matters because you cannot assign one genre to the entire Bible. Trying to determine the genre of the Bible is like trying to determine the genre of a library. A library contains a mixture of genres, from biography to history, poetry to epic fiction, spirituality to romance, comedy to apocalyptic literature, and much more.

Assigning a single genre to the Bible is impossible because it likewise contains a collection of different books, falling under many different categories. For example, Genesis opens with a creation story written in the style of an ancient saga. Leviticus contains the genres of history and law. The Psalms feature poetry and hymns of praise and worship. Wisdom offers proverbs about living well. The story of Jonah is a historical parable of sorts. The gospels are written in the unique genre of first-century, Greco-Roman biography. Revelation is apocalyptic prophecy. Each of these genres requires a different interpretive lens, just as

we approach the books of a library differently depending on what section they're in.

Moreover, books of the Bible sometimes contain multiple genres within themselves. For example, consider the book of Genesis. The creation stories in the early chapters are written in a different literary style than the more historical narratives in later chapters. Therefore, it's not even a fair question to ask, "How do you interpret the book of Genesis?" The proper response is, "Well, which part of Genesis? I interpret different parts of Genesis in different ways."

Determining the Genre of a Biblical Text

How do we determine the genre of a particular book or text of the Bible? For instance, how do we know the writer of St. Luke's gospel was intending to convey actual history, a true biography of Jesus Christ, and not just a fairy tale? We handle this question the same as we do for any other book in the world. Suppose that I mailed you a book that you had never heard of. How would you approach the book? How would you determine its genre?

You would start by searching for clues. First, you would probably notice the author. Who wrote this book? Have I heard of this author? What kind of writing does he do? Perhaps the author was Stephen King and the book was telling a horror story. You would immediately know that this book's genre is likely thriller fiction.

But suppose you didn't recognize the author. As the next step, you would look for clues about the book. You could read a description of the book and the endorsements on

the back cover. You could see how other readers who have finished the book talk about it. How do they place it? You might do a little internet research to answer these questions.

However, you would find the biggest clues inside the book. You would start reading it and ask, what kind of language does the author use? Within the first few pages, you would recognize the author's purpose and intended content. For instance, is the author recording the life of a man or woman with annotated references to dates and places, all written in the third person? In that case, it's likely a biography. But suppose the story took place in a nameless land, long ago, and featured mythical creatures and an overarching moral lesson. In that case, it would likely be a fairy tale or fantasy fiction.

So, from identifying the author, the language, the context, and the clues within the text, we can generally determine the genre of any passage we read. Most of us pick up this basic literary skill in our early school years, and we should apply it when reading the Bible.

But what if that's still not enough? What if you're reading a particular book or passage in the Bible, and you're still unsure about the genre, even after all those clues? The next move is to turn to the experts. Look online or pick up a good Bible commentary by a trusted Catholic writer and see what genre they place it in. However, determining the genre is only the first step in understanding a passage in the Bible, not the last. We also need strategies for interpretation.

FOUR WAYS TO INTERPRET THE BIBLE

Just as your body has five different senses for understanding and interpreting the world around you, so the Church has defined four ways of understanding any particular passage of the Bible—the four senses of scripture.

They're grouped into two styles, the literal and the spiritual. And the spiritual style can be further divided into three senses: the allegorical, the moral, and the anagogical. So, the Church gives us four ways of understanding a passage: the literal sense, the allegorical sense, the moral sense, and the anagogical sense.

The Literal Sense

The literal sense is most important. As St. Thomas Aquinas says, "All other senses of sacred scripture are based on the literal."[1] The literal sense is the meaning that the original author meant to convey in the passage. For example, when the prophet Isaiah says, "The young woman, pregnant and about to bear a son, shall name him Emmanuel" (Is 7:14), he means that one day, there will be a young woman and she will conceive a son who shall be called Emmanuel.

Note that the literal sense is not always historical or scientific. For example, we read in the first chapter of Genesis that God created light on the first day. Does this mean that the original author was intending to establish the precise chronological moment when light was created? No. He was not intending to teach history or science. We know that because while light was created on the first day, the sun

wasn't created until the fourth day, and since light on earth emanates from the sun, we know that the author wasn't intending to record a scientific fact. Remember, the literal sense refers to what the author *intended* to convey. And in the Genesis creation story, the author is affirming that God is the Creator of the world and of all physical reality in our universe.

We shouldn't confuse the literal sense with reading the Bible literalistically. Many Fundamentalists believe the Bible teaches that God created the universe in seven calendar days in the exact order that Genesis presents. This is a literalistic reading, a flat interpretation that ignores the genre and the author's intention. This is a key difference between Catholics and some other Christians: we do indeed read the entire Bible literally, but that's not the same as reading it literalistically.

So, that's the first and the most important sense, the literal sense. But the three spiritual senses add more layers of meaning. All three refer to figurative or metaphorical ways of understanding different passages. You have probably used these yourself without even knowing it.

The Allegorical Sense

The allegorical sense involves understanding the events recorded in the Bible by recognizing how they point to Jesus. In some ways, the whole biblical narrative from Genesis through Revelation refers to Christ. The Old Testament foreshadows Jesus, and the New Testament reflects back on

him. So, you can read almost every passage of the Bible in light of Christ.

For example, the church fathers loved to interpret the Exodus story in light of Jesus. As they saw it, Moses led the Israelites through the Red Sea to escape the Egyptians, just as Christ takes his people through Baptism to escape sin and death. In the desert, God gave the Israelites manna, a bread-like substance to sustain them on their journey, just as Christ gives his people the Eucharist, the bread of heaven.

Reading a text allegorically is not limited to the Old Testament. For example, consider an allegorical reading of Jesus's parable of the Good Samaritan. In the passage, the injured man was taken to an inn and healed with oil and wine. In an allegorical interpretation, the inn symbolizes the Church; and the oil and wine, the sacraments.

The allegorical sense looks at not the literal meaning of the passage but how the words present a symbol or sign pointing to Christ or his Church.

The Moral Sense

The moral sense involves reading a passage with a view toward how it leads us to behave. Most devotional Bibles and books approach scripture with a heavy emphasis on this sense. They might feature a small passage of scripture and then a reflection on how to apply it to your life, how you might act differently in light of that passage.

For example, consider again the Good Samaritan parable. The allegorical sense sees Christ, the Church, and the sacraments reflected in the parable. But the moral sense says

that we ought to help anyone in need, regardless of who they are. When Jesus commands us to "love our neighbor," he doesn't mean only those in our ethnic group or religion—he means anyone who is suffering. Anyone in need is our neighbor, and we should help them. This is reading the passage with the moral sense. Again, the moral sense shows how a biblical passage shapes the way we should live.

The Anagogical Sense

Anagogical comes from a Greek word that means "leading," and this sense points to where Christ is leading us in the future. The anagogical reading understands each passage through the lens of our eternal destiny.

This sense is the least used among the four, but it is fairly prominent when reading books such as the prophets and the Psalms. For example, Psalm 121 says, "I rejoiced at the things that were said to me: We shall go into the house of the Lord" (Ps 121:1, Douay-Rheims). In the literal sense, when the psalmist talks about going to the "house of the Lord," he is referring to Jerusalem and its Temple. But if we read this verse anagogically, we are led to reflect on the true house of the Lord, the heavenly Jerusalem, which is our ultimate destiny. The anagogical sense interprets a text in terms of its eternal significance.

This fourfold interpretation is very important. It means there's no single right way to read a scripture passage. Every passage in the Bible has multiple layers, multiple levels of meaning. So long as your interpretation doesn't conflict with other truths of the faith, you're free to plumb

the depths of the Bible and understand it in multiple ways, which is very liberating and exciting.

Expert Interview with Dr. Mark Giszczak

➤ **Watch the interview here: https://claritasu.com/giszczak**

Dr. Mark Giszczak received his PhD in biblical studies at The Catholic University of America. He teaches scripture at the Augustine Institute, where he has been on the faculty since 2009. He also writes on the website CatholicBibleStudent.com. He is the author of a great book titled *Light on the Dark Passages of Scripture*, which was published by Our Sunday Visitor in 2015. In my view, it is the best popular go-to source for Catholics wrestling with difficult biblical questions, especially regarding the Old Testament.

In this interview Dr. Giszczak responds to the following questions:

1. What foundational principles should we keep in mind when opening the Bible?
2. What's wrong with the view that the Old and New Testaments present two different kinds of gods?
3. How do you understand passages in which God seems to condone mass murder?
4. What approach should we take to things like polygamy and slavery in the Old Testament?
5. How does Jesus affect the way we read the Bible?
6. What are some talking points and strategies for Catholics when discussing the Bible?