

How to Read the Bible

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WE BELIEVE THAT THE SCRIPTURES constitute a **coherent whole**. They are at once divinely inspired and humanly expressed. They bear authoritative witness to God's revelation of Himself - in creation, in the Incarnation of the Word, and the whole history of salvation. And as such they express the **word of God in human language**. We know, receive, and interpret Scripture through the Church and in the Church. Our approach to the Bible is one of obedience.

We may distinguish four key qualities that mark our reading of Scripture, namely:

- our reading should be obedient,
- it should be ecclesial, within the Church,
- it should be Christ-centered,
- it should be personal.

Reading the Bible with Obedience

FIRST OF ALL, when reading Scripture, we are to listen in a spirit of **obedience**. But, while divinely inspired, the Bible is also **humanly expressed**. It is a whole library of different books written at varying times by distinct persons. Each book of the Bible reflects the outlook of the age in which it was written and the particular viewpoint of the author. For God does nothing in isolation, divine grace cooperates with human freedom. God does not abolish our individuality but enhances it. And so it is in the writing of inspired Scripture. The authors were not just a passive instrument, a dictation machine recording a message. Each writer of Scripture contributes his particular personal gifts. Alongside the divine aspect, there is also a human element in Scripture. We are to value both.

Each of the four Gospels, for example, has its own particular approach. Matthew presents more particularly a Jewish understanding of Christ, with an emphasis on the kingdom of heaven. Mark contains specific, picturesque details of Christ's ministry not given elsewhere. Luke expresses the universality of Christ's love, His all-embracing compassion that extends equally to Jew and to Gentile. In John there is a more inward and more mystical approach to Christ, with an emphasis on divine light and divine indwelling. We are to enjoy and explore to the full this life-giving variety within the Bible.

Because Scripture is in this way the word of God expressed in human language, there is room for honest and exacting inquiry when studying the Bible. Exploring the human aspect of the Bible, we are to use to the full our God-given human reason.

Alongside this human element, however, we see always the divine element. These are not simply books written by individual human writers. We hear in Scripture not just human words, marked by a greater or lesser skill and perceptiveness, but the eternal, uncreated Word of God Himself, the divine Word of salvation. When we come to the Bible, then, we come not simply out of curiosity, to gain information. We come to the Bible with a specific question, a personal question about ourselves: "How can I be saved?"

As God's divine word of salvation in human language, Scripture should evoke in us a sense of wonder. Do you ever feel, as you read or listen, that it has all become too familiar? Has the Bible grown rather boring? Continually we need to cleanse the doors of our perception and to look in amazement with new eyes at what the Lord sets before us.

We are to feel toward the Bible with a sense of wonder, and sense of expectation and surprise. There are so many rooms in Scripture that we have yet to enter. There is so much **depth** and **majesty** for us to discover. If obedience means wonder, it also means **listening**.

We are better at talking than listening. We hear the sound of our own voice, but often we don't pause to hear the voice of the other person who is speaking to us. So the first requirement, as we read Scripture, is to stop talking and to **listen** - to listen with obedience.

Reading the Bible, we are to model ourselves on the Blessed Virgin Mary, for she is supremely the one who listens. At the Annunciation she listens with obedience and responds to the angel, "*Be it unto me according to thy word*" (Luke 1:38). She could not have borne the Word of God in her body if she had not first, listened to the Word of God in her heart. After the shepherds have adored the newborn Christ, it is said of her: "*Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart*" (Luke 2:19). Again, when Mary finds Jesus in the temple, we are told: "*His mother kept all these things in her heart*" (Luke 2:51). The same need for listening is emphasized in the last words attributed to the Mother of God in Scripture, at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee: "*Whatsoever He saith unto you, do it*" (John 2:5), she says to the servants - and to all of us.

In all this the Blessed Virgin Mary serves as a mirror, as a living icon of the Biblical Christian. We are to be like her as we hear the Word of God: pondering, keeping all these things in our hearts, doing whatever He tells us. We are to listen in obedience as God speaks.

Understanding the Bible through the Church

N THE SECOND PLACE, we should receive and interpret Scripture through the Church and in the Church. Our approach to the Bible is not only obedient but ecclesial.

It is the Church that tells us what is Scripture. A book is not part of Scripture because of any particular theory about its dating and authorship. Even if it could be proved, for example, that the Fourth Gospel was not actually written by John the beloved disciple of Christ, this would not alter the fact that we accept the Fourth Gospel as Holy Scripture. Why? Because the Gospel of John is accepted by the Church and in the Church.

It is the Church that tells us what is Scripture, and it is also the Church that tells us how Scripture is to be understood. Coming upon the Ethiopian as he read the Old Testament in his chariot, Philip the Apostle asked him, "*Understandest thou what thou readest?*" And the Ethiopian answered, "*How can I, unless some man should guide me?*" (Acts 8:30-31). We are all in the position of the Ethiopian. The words of Scripture are not always self-explanatory. God speaks directly to the heart of each one of us as we read our Bible. Scripture reading is a personal dialogue between each one of us and Christ - but we also need **guidance**. And our guide is the Church. We make full use of our own personal understanding, assisted by the Spirit, we make full use of the findings of modern Biblical research, but always we submit private opinion - whether our own or that of the scholars - to the total experience of the Church throughout the ages.

We read the Bible personally, but not as isolated individuals. We read as the members of a family, the family of the Church. When reading Scripture, we say not "I" but "**We**." We read in communion with all the other members of the Body of Christ, in all parts of the world and in all generations of time. The decisive test and criterion for our understanding of what the Scripture means is the **mind of the Church**. **The Bible is the book of the Church.**

To discover this "mind of the Church, where do we begin? Our first step is to see how Scripture is used in worship. How, in particular, are Biblical lessons chosen for reading at the different feasts? We should also consult the writings of the Church Fathers, and consider how they interpret the Bible. Our manner of reading Scripture is in this way both liturgical and patristic.

Such is the effect of reading Scripture ecclesially, in the Church and with the Church. Studying the Old Testament in this liturgical way and using the Fathers to help us, everywhere we uncover signposts pointing forward to the mystery of Christ and of His Mother. Reading the Old

Testament in the light of the New, and the New in the light of the, Old - as the Church's calendar encourages us to do - we discover the unity of Holy Scripture. One of the best ways of identifying correspondences between the Old and New Testaments is to use a good Biblical concordance. This can often tell us more about the meaning of Scripture than any commentary.

Christ, the heart of the Bible

THE THIRD ELEMENT in our reading of Scripture is that it should be **Christ-centered**. The Scriptures constitute a **coherent whole** because they all are Christ-centered. Salvation through the Messiah is their central and unifying topic. He is as a "thread" that runs through all of Holy Scripture, from the first sentence to the last. We have already mentioned the way in which Christ may be seen foreshadowed on the pages of the Old Testament.

Much modern critical study of Scripture in the West has adopted an analytical approach, breaking up each book into different sources. The connecting links are unraveled, and the Bible is reduced to a series of bare primary units. There is certainly value in this. But we need to see the unity as well as the diversity of Scripture, the all-embracing end as well as the scattered beginnings. Church prefers on the whole a **synthetic** rather than an analytical approach, seeing Scripture as an **integrated whole**, with Christ everywhere as the bond of union.

Always we seek for the point of convergence between the Old Testament and the New, and this we find in Jesus Christ. We assign particular significance to the "typological" method of interpretation, whereby "*types*" of Christ, signs and symbols of His work, are discerned throughout the Old Testament. A notable example of this is Melchizedek, the priest-king of Salem, who offered bread and wine to Abraham (Genesis 14:18), and who is seen as a type of Christ not only by the Fathers but even in the New Testament itself (Hebrews 5:6; 7:1). Another instance is the way in which, as we have seen, the Old Passover foreshadows the New; Israel's deliverance from Pharaoh at the Red Sea anticipates our deliverance from sin through the death and Resurrection of the Savior. This is the method of interpretation that we are to apply throughout the Bible.

A Biblical Christian is the one who, wherever he looks, on every page of Scripture, finds everywhere Christ.

The Bible as a personal reading

IN THE WORDS of an early ascetic writer in the Christian East, Saint Mark the Monk: "He who is humble in his thoughts and engaged in spiritual work, when he reads the Holy Scriptures, will apply everything to himself and not to his neighbor." As Christians we are to look everywhere in Scripture for a **personal application**. We are to ask not just "What does it mean?" but "What does it mean to me?" Scripture is a personal dialogue between the Savior and myself - Christ speaking to me, and me answering. That is the fourth criterion in our Bible reading.

I am to see all the stories in Scripture as part of my own personal story. Who is Adam? The name Adam means "man," "human," and so the Genesis account of Adam's fall is also a story about me. I am Adam. It is to me that God speaks when He says to Adam, "Where art thou?" (Genesis 3:9). "Where is God?" we often ask. But the real question is what God asks the Adam in each of us: "Where art thou?"

When, in the story of Cain and Abel, we read God's words to Cain, "Where is Abel thy brother?" (Genesis 4:9), these words, too, are addressed to each of us. Who is Cain? It is myself. And God asks the Cain in each of us, "Where is thy brother?" The way to God lies through love of other people, and there is no other way. Disowning my brother, I replace the image of God with the mark of Cain, and deny my own vital humanity.

In reading Scripture, we may take three steps. **First**, what we have in Scripture is *sacred history*: the history of the world from the Creation, the history of the chosen people, the history of God Incarnate in Palestine, and the "mighty works" after Pentecost. The Christianity that we find in the Bible is not an ideology, not a philosophical theory, but a historical faith.

Then we are to take a **second** step. The history presented in the Bible is a *personal history*. We see God intervening at specific times and in specific places, as He enters into dialogue with individual persons. He addresses each one by name. We see set before us the specific calls issued by God to Abraham, Moses and David, to Rebekah and Ruth, to Isaiah and the prophets, and then to Mary and the Apostles. We see the selectivity of the divine action in history, not as a scandal but as a blessing. God's love is universal in scope, but He chooses to become Incarnate in a particular comer of the earth, at a particular time and from a particular Mother. We are in this manner to savor all the *uniqueness* of God's action as recorded in Scripture. The person who loves the Bible loves details of dating and geography, the exact places where Christ lived and taught, died and rose again. An excellent way to enter more deeply into our Scripture reading is to undertake a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and Galilee. Walk where Christ walked. Go down to the Dead Sea, sit alone on the rocks, feel how Christ felt during the forty days of His temptation in the wilderness. Drink from the well where He spoke with the Samaritan woman. Go at night to the Garden of Gethsemane, sit in the dark under the ancient olives and look across the valley to the lights of the city. Experience to the full the reality of the historical setting, and take that experience back with you to your daily Scripture reading.

Then we are to take a **third** step. Reliving Biblical history in all its particularity, we are to *apply it directly to ourselves*. We are to say to ourselves, "All these places and events are not just far away and long ago, but are also part of my own personal encounter with Christ. The stories include me."

Betrayal, for example, is part of the personal story of everyone. Have we not all betrayed others at some time in our life, and have we not all known what it is to be betrayed, and does not the memory of these moments leave continuing scars on our psyche? Reading, then, the account of Saint Peter's betrayal of Christ and of his restoration after the Resurrection, we can see ourselves as actors in the story. Imagining what both Peter and Jesus must have experienced at the moment immediately after the betrayal, we enter into their feelings and make them our own. I am Peter; in this situation can I also be Christ? Reflecting likewise on the process of reconciliation - seeing how the Risen Christ with a love utterly devoid of sentimentality restored the fallen Peter to fellowship, seeing how Peter on his side had the courage to accept this restoration - we ask ourselves: How Christ-like am I to those who have betrayed me? And, after my own acts of betrayal, am I able to accept the forgiveness of others - am I able to forgive myself? Or am I timid, mean, holding myself back, never ready to give myself fully to anything, either good or bad? As the Desert Fathers say, "Better someone who has sinned, if he knows he has sinned and repents, than a person who has not sinned and thinks of himself as righteous."

Have I gained the boldness of Saint Mary Magdalene, her constancy and loyalty, when she went out to anoint the body of Christ in the tomb (John 20:1)? Do I hear the Risen Savior call me by name, as He called her, and do I respond *Rabboni* (Teacher) with her simplicity and completeness (John 20:16)?

Reading Scripture in this way - in obedience, as a member of the Church, finding Christ everywhere, seeing everything as a part of my own personal story - we shall sense something of the variety and depth to be found in the Bible. Yet always we shall feel that in our Biblical exploration we are only at the very beginning. We are like someone launching out in a tiny boat across a limitless ocean.

"Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path" (Psalm 118 [119]:105).

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How to Read the Bible. Orthodox perspective (extracts)

<http://orthodoxeurope.org>

Introduction to Lectio Divina

A New Spiritual Springtime

For many years Cardinal Martini taught young people in Milan to read the Scriptures for themselves and to meditate and pray with them. Here is an example. He read with them the story of the raising to life of the son of the widow of Nain. Then he asked them to reflect on the story. He drew their attention to one sentence: 'Young man, I tell you: get up.' He pointed out that Jesus says three things in that one sentence, and that each one deserves our full attention.

'Young man:' Jesus addresses him first as one among the young people of his time – he belongs to a particular family in a particular cultural and religious community. Young people are conscious of belonging among their peers.

'I tell you:' Jesus speaks to him as a unique person. What Jesus has to say now is directly for him and for him alone, and he knows that Jesus recognises and values him for who he is. He is not one of a crowd but a person with his own identity.

'Get up:' Jesus tells him to get on his feet, to live his life to its fullest potential. Martini helps the young people to hear Jesus now addressing these words directly to each of themselves, to ponder them, to find encouragement and inspiration in them, and to respond to Jesus in prayer.

This is *lectio divina*: reading the Scriptures, pondering them until they become like a mirror in which we see ourselves, our lives and our world reflected, and then responding to God in prayer.

Old and New

The two Latin words mean 'sacred reading' and they remind us that this is an ancient method that goes back to the first thousand years of Christianity; during that time it was the principal way of reading the Bible. The method went into decline but continued in monasteries. St. Dominic used it. In a thirteenth century document, which describes his Nine Ways of Prayer, *lectio divina*, was the eighth way. He would sit down by himself, recollect himself in the presence of God and read and pray, letting the words touch his mind as if he heard God actually speaking to him. It was as if he was discussing something with a friend; "at times he would listen quietly and discuss and argue, and then laugh and weep all at once, and fix his gaze and bow his head, speaking quietly again and beating his breast. He passed quickly from reading to prayer, from prayer to meditation, from meditation to contemplation."

Lectio divina has been rediscovered in our own time as people are learning to use it by themselves and in groups. There are two reasons for practising it. The first is to meet God in a personal way. The Vatican Council document on Revelation says that when we read the Scriptures, the Heavenly Father comes lovingly to meet his children and to converse with them. The second reason is to grow in wisdom: to come to understand God better, to understand ourselves and other people and the world in which we live. Carlos Mesters has spent his life helping very poor communities in Brazil to read the Bible; he says that their concern is not to interpret the Bible, but to interpret their lives in the light of the Bible. In the Word of God they find the strength to keep going and not to give up the struggle.

The Bible is a Book of Stories, not a Book of Information

When God decided to give a book to humanity, he could have given us a book of information. Such a book would have been very useful. When we were puzzled about any of the big questions that arise in our lives we could look up the index and get the information we needed - about God, prayer, right and wrong, suffering, living in peace with others, life and death and the hereafter, and so on. To read such a book, we would use our minds to grasp the information. But God gave us a different kind of book: the Bible is for the most part a book of stories or narratives. A story engages our imagination. Then our feelings are touched – we become excited or sad or angry or anxious.

Another faculty that comes into play is our memory; a story reminds us of something in our own experience – something that has happened to ourselves or to people we know about.

Every story has characters, at least one; and it has movement, a plot. We identify with one or other of the characters. Some part of the plot may remind us of something in our own lives or in the lives of people we know about. Many who read the Bible read it as if it was a book of information; it may take time and practice to learn to read the Bible in a way that allows it to stir our imagination, touch our feelings and evoke our memories.

Lectio divina is done in three stages.

1. Reading

We choose a small portion of scripture and we read it over and over. Very often people choose to read the Gospel of the coming Sunday; they read it from the previous Monday all through the week. We read slowly and reverently. We give our whole attention to the words in front of us. We allow ourselves to enjoy the story, to grow to love the story and the words in which it is told. If something in the story puzzles us or seems to make no sense, we may need help from a commentary or from some one who knows more about the Scriptures than we do. It takes discipline to stay with one portion of Scripture, especially if it seems to say nothing to us for a long time.

2. Meditation

Reading flows naturally into meditation. We may do our meditation with the Bible in our hands. Likewise we may do it as we go about the activities of our day. At this stage our interest will focus on the present time and we ask: Where is this text happening in my life or in the world around me right now? In a natural and spontaneous way the answer will appear, either when something in the text reminds me of something that has happened in my experience, or something that has happened reminds me of the text. Suppose I am meditating on the words of Jesus at the Last Supper: "No one has greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friend." I ask myself: what does this remind me of? Where have I seen this happening? In moments like this I am not waiting for the text to give me a message for my life, or to tell me what I should do. I am waiting for the text to evoke a concrete memory. I may remember a neighbour who has been looking after a sick relative with great generosity for a long time. I recognise that this person has been doing what Jesus spoke of... Or I read something in the papers that reminds me of the words of Jesus.

As I continue to meditate I may recall times I laid down my life for others in smaller ways. I see a pattern in the concrete memories that come to me: good people are willing to lay down their lives for others. I am touched by this and feel convinced that it is a wise way to live, and I am drawn to live in this generous way.

3. Prayer

Prayer occurs spontaneously. In our meditation, when we are reminded of something in our experience, we are moved to pray. The prayer will be of three kinds:

- - **thanksgiving:** when the text reminds us of goodness we have seen, we pray in praise and thanksgiving;
- - **repentance (or humility):** when it makes us aware of the wrong we have done or the good we have failed to do, we ask for forgiveness.
- - **petition:** when the text reminds us of our own needs or of the needs of others, we pray in petition.

If we stay long enough with our reading and meditating we may be led to a deeper moment of prayer in which we are no longer thanking or repenting or asking, but are leaving ourselves trustingly in God's hands. This is called contemplative prayer.

Pope Benedict spoke about *lectio divina* on 16 September 2006: "I would like to recall and recommend the ancient tradition of *Lectio Divina*: the diligent reading of Sacred Scripture accompanied by prayer brings about that intimate dialogue in which the person reading hears God who is speaking, and in praying, responds to him with trusting openness of heart. If it is effectively promoted, this practice will bring to the Church – I am convinced of it – a new spiritual springtime."

Brendan Clifford
<https://www.goodnews.ie>

Lectio Divina: main simple steps

Step 1. Invoke the Holy Spirit

Without the Holy Spirit, the Bible is just any other book. It's like a body without soul, when the heart stops it becomes a corpse. Likewise with the Bible: without the Holy Spirit this Word it will be a dead word for me..

Step 2. Read

I read the text attentively: "Whoever listens, without attention, is as much guilty as the one who is guilty of not handling the Eucharist properly leaving it to fall down." (Cesary of Arles)

In the reading, God dialogues with his people. In the biblical reading God dialogues with me. "They shall all be taught by God." (Jo. 6,45)
 Through the Lectio Divina I become a *Theodidacta* (Clement of Alexandria)

Step 3. Meditate

This is the moment we allow ourselves to be screened and judged by the Word. I allow that the Word enlightens my life.

I question the text:

- who appears in the text?
- what are they saying?
- why are they saying what they say?
- what they are saying is telling me anything also to my life?

Step 4. Pray

"If the text is a prayer, you pray. If the text is thanksgiving, you rejoice. If the text is full of hope, have hope; if it expresses fear, you fear.

The things you feel in the text, they are a mirror of yourselves." (St. Augustine)
 In the reading I listened... Here in prayer I answer to what I listened.

Step 5. Remain in the Word

Like Mary. Revolve those things we read and learned throughout the day...

"If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples" (Jo. 8, 31)

We can end with a small prayer in which we ask the Lord to help us to put into practice in our daily life all that we listened, read, meditated and learned in prayer.