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CELEBRATING GOD'S WORD HOW CATHOLICS READ THE BIBLE

To correctly understand a biblical passage, we must consider its context.

By Margaret Nutting Ralph, PhD



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Although we may know that not all Christians read and interpret the Bible the same way, we may feel hard-pressed to explain the differences. It helps to begin with what we share in common: all Christians accept the Bible as God's inspired word and revere it above all other literature. The Catholic Church teaches that all Christians should be "nourished and ruled" by Scripture (Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, 21).

It's not difficult to understand what it means to be *nourished* by Scripture. We're to be fed by Scripture daily and hear it as a living word that guides us as a light on our paths. The nourishment of Scripture corrects and encourages us, helping us name our faults and grow in love. As parents provide nourishment for children, our heavenly Father nourishes us with the Eucharist *and* the biblical word of God.

To be *ruled* by Scripture might sound threatening or off-putting to some. We may not like the thought of anything or anyone ruling us. But being *ruled* by Scripture is simply recognizing its authority because it is God's self-revelation. If we acknowledge God's authority in our lives, we'll also recognize the authority of God's inspired word in the Bible.

GOD'S LIVING WORD

When we correctly understand what inspired biblical authors have taught, we're better able to understand the moral order God has established, the way God desires that we live. Scripture can help us make wise decisions and live in cooperation with God's will rather than thwarting it with our selfish and sinful choices.

All Catholic liturgies are built on a foundation of Scripture because we believe it speaks to us in our present circumstances, giving us guidance and inspiration. We're acquainted with hearing Scripture as a living word and are familiar with those passages and stories that appear in the *Lectionary*, the book from which the Bible readings are proclaimed at Mass. We're accustomed to hearing homilies that place the week's readings in conversation with our lives. Some of us "break open the word" in faith-sharing groups where we explore what the

readings say to us in the context of our lives. Many of us read and reflect on Scripture in our daily prayer.

All of these prayerful uses of Scripture are essential. Scripture is a living word that nourishes us as pilgrim people, a people on a journey to greater closeness with God. Scripture is far from simply a historical artifact, important to past generations but no longer nourishing for us.

CONSIDER THE CONTEXT

In addition to being a living word that nourishes and rules us, guiding us to make wise choices, Scripture teaches eternal truths that are true for all generations and cultures. In order to understand these eternal truths, we must put Scripture passages in the context in which they appear in the Bible.

If our interaction with Scripture is limited to hearing it as a living word in the context of our own lives, and if we never seek to understand passages in their original contexts, we're treading on dangerous ground. We may misunderstand

God's word and use the authority of Scripture to justify our own desires, misunderstandings, or prejudices. We're in danger of abusing Scripture for our own purposes rather than allowing ourselves to be called to conversion by Scripture and ruled by the universal truths taught by the inspired authors.

For this reason, the Catholic Church teaches us to root our understanding of Scripture as a living word in a contextual understanding of the biblical text. Before we can understand what the inspired biblical authors are teaching and "what God wants to reveal through the sacred authors

for our salvation" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC] 137), we need to put Scripture passages in their biblical context.

This is where the Catholic approach to Scripture differs from that of some other Christians. Biblical fundamentalists, those who don't consider context, believe that the Bible can teach with authority on every subject, even scientific topics. Catholics and most Protestants, however, acknowledge that the Bible includes presumptions of the times its books were written that we now know are not scientifically accurate. Of course, the biblical authors are not trying to teach science.



CNS PHOTO/KAREN CALLAWAY

To correctly understand the truth taught in a passage of Scripture, we must consider three contexts: the literary form, the presumed beliefs at the time of the author, and the 2,000-year process of revelation.

1. Literary Form

We're already familiar with the concept of literary forms or genres. When we read a newspaper, we adjust our expectations to fit the literary form used. We know a front-page story informs, answering who, what, when, and where. An editorial tries to persuade. A comic strip uses fictional characters to amuse. A political cartoon critically analyzes, often attributing to a public figure words that the person never said.

The Bible may look like a single book with chapters, but it's actually a library of books that contain many different kinds of writing. As with a newspaper, the books of the Bible use many different literary forms. Any literary form can be used to teach truth. The Bible probes truths that respond to such questions as *Who is God? Who are we in relationship to God?* and *How are we to live so as to please God and fulfill God's purposes on earth?*

It's extremely important that we consider the literary form in which any passage of Scripture appears. Why? If we ignore the context of literary form, we'll likely misunderstand what the author is teaching. "To interpret Scripture correctly, the reader must be attentive to what the human authors truly wanted to affirm and to what God wanted to reveal to us by their words. In order to discover *the sacred authors' intention*, the reader must take into account...the literary genres in use at that time" (CCC 109–110). In other words, we understand that the authority of Scripture rests in what the inspired author intended to teach, not in whatever meaning we might attach to words taken out of context. We must consider the literary form in order to correctly understand an author's intent and meaning.

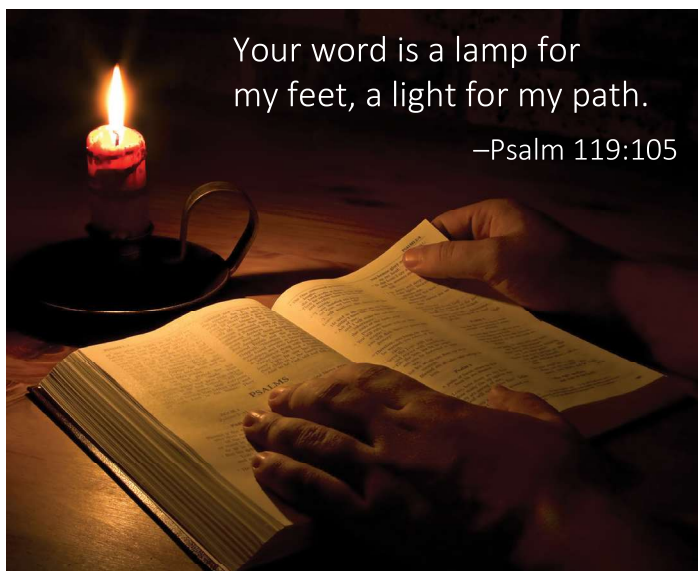
2. Beliefs of the Time

The beliefs and presumptions of the author's time and culture are also important contexts to consider. The authority of Scripture rests in what the inspired author is teaching on the subject addressed (God and our relationship with God)—not in something the author says by way of application or example.

Applications and examples often reflect presumptions of the time that we, who live in a scientific age, do not share with the inspired author or the author's generation. For example, the author of the story of creation (Genesis 1:1—2:4) lived at a time when everyone presumed the earth was flat and had a dome-like

Your word is a lamp for
my feet, a light for my path.

—Psalm 119:105



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CHURCH TEACHING ON INTERPRETING THE BIBLE

Many Catholics are surprised to learn that the official teaching authority of the Catholic Church, the magisterium, teaches us to be contextual readers of Scripture. The first Church document that directed us to do so was the 1943 encyclical *On Promoting Biblical Studies*. Its teachings were reaffirmed in the Vatican II document *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* and in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (see 110, 112, 120, and 126). There really is no question about it: we need to consider context in order to understand meaning.

IS THE BIBLE ERROR-FREE?

Considering the contexts of the beliefs and presumptions of biblical times and the process of revelation naturally brings up the topic of inerrancy. Catholics do accept the inerrancy of the Bible, but we define the word inerrancy differently from how some people define it. Catholics believe biblical authors were inspired on the topics that they were addressing: theological topics. Inspired authors weren't inspired on subjects they weren't addressing, such as scientific topics. Inspired biblical authors teach us the truth we need to know for our salvation (*Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, 11).

DIG DEEPER

When have you disagreed with someone
about the meaning of a biblical passage?

How does Scripture nourish you? How does it
rule or guide your life?

How can you learn about the context
of a biblical passage or book?

structure above it. So, the author presents God making the earth as the author assumes the earth is. On the second day, God creates the dome (sky) that “separated the water below the dome from the water above the dome” (Genesis 1:7).

As Catholic contextual readers, we believe that what each author of Scripture teaches us about our relationship with God is inspired revelation from God. The author of Genesis is teaching that God made all that exists. At the same time, we don’t claim that Scripture teaches with authority what are presumptions of the time about the shape of the earth. No biblical author set out to teach us scientific facts.

3. Process of Revelation

The Bible took form over 2,000 years. The process began with events that occurred around 1850 BC and concluded when the books in the Old and New Testaments were accepted as canonical, as official biblical texts, by the early Church around the end of the fourth century AD.

The books of the Bible, shared first through oral tradition, then written and edited over time, reveal a growth process on the part of the inspired authors. That is, while an inspired author teaches the truth on a subject, that author may not be teaching the whole truth. A later author, addressing the same topic, will add to the original author’s insights.

For example, inspired authors grew in their understanding of the ramifications of the revelation that God is love. Early authors realized that God loved them, the Israelites, and had entered a covenant relationship with them. However, they did not realize that God also created and loves other nations, even Israel’s enemies. These insights are taught by later authors.

An early author believed and taught that suffering is caused by sin. While true, this is a partial truth. Sin always causes suffering, but not all suffering is punishment for sin. This additional truth appears in books written later.



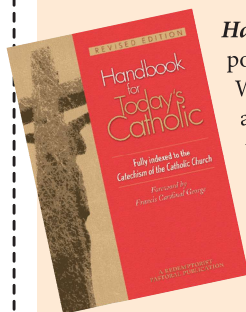
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Christians believe that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of God’s promises to God’s people, that in Jesus we’ve received the fullness of revelation. Nearly 2,000 years of ongoing revelation prepared the way for the Messiah, Jesus, the Christ. We misinterpret the Bible if we take an early insight and present it as the fullness of revelation when, in fact, it’s one step in the process of revelation that we’ve received through the Bible.

We see, then, that the Bible is a product of the community, has been received by the community, and is proclaimed, interpreted, and lived out within that community, the Church. Through this ongoing process we, the Church, continue to be nourished and ruled by Scripture.

Margaret Nutting Ralph, PhD, is the director of the master of arts in pastoral studies degree program for Roman Catholics at Lexington Theological Seminary, Lexington, Kentucky, and is the author of fourteen books on Scripture.

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