

DIVINE REVELATION

“BY LETTER” (2 Thessalonians 2:15):

The Bible:

the Written Word of God

Part IIb:

**Hermeneutics--Interpreting
and**

Understanding the Bible



Hermeneutics: Understanding Revelation

In all human communication, the receiver must create meaning from the symbols (the message) used by the communicator. All Christians must discover the meaning intended by the author(s) of the books of the Bible to understand what God is revealing. The process of discovering meaning from the Bible is called hermeneutics. All Christians recognize that how we approach the Bible determines often what we take from it.



Understanding what God would have us know from the Bible is made difficult by many factors:

The Bible contains some very ancient books;

Sometimes it is not even known who the author of a book really was;

Not knowing for certain who an author was is complicated by the period of time in which an author lived;

Since many authors were ancient Semites, their way of thinking and manner of expressing themselves differ from our own;

Since we do not possess any original manuscripts of the books of the Bible, we have to contend with copying and editing which occurred over time;

Then the issue of the multiplicity of human authors and editors complicates our understanding;

Finally, the fact of both a divine and a human author makes understanding a challenge.

Hermeneutics (from the Greek word *hermeneia* which means speech or interpretation) is used to cover a broad scope in the process of understanding. It refers to

- interpretation by speech itself, as language interprets the mind;
- the process of translation from an unintelligible language to an intelligible one (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:10);
- interpretation by commentary and explanation.

Catholic Christians have often been accused of not being allowed to read the Bible on their own. This could not be further from the truth. When, in history, Catholics were forbidden to read the Bible it was a particular translation which usually was unauthorized and highly illiterate in its fidelity to original sources. In other words, unauthorized versions were often just simply bad translations.

It is often said Catholics cannot interpret the Bible on their own. The **Papal Encyclical, *Divino Afflante Spiritus*, of Pope Pius XII in 1943** attempted to counteract this error by stating that there are but few texts whose understanding has been determined by the teaching authority of the Church; and Catholics do indeed have freedom to interpret the Scriptures.

The Catholic Church has been solicitous over the way in which the Bible is interpreted. Experience teaches us that it is easy to find even contradictory meanings from the same Scripture with an unbridled approach to reading and interpreting the Bible.



The Catholic Church teaches that the first principle of hermeneutics is the literal meaning of the text.

Spiritus Paraclitus

(Benedict XV, September 15, 1920)

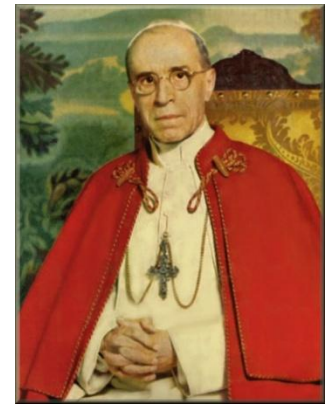
“As Jerome insisted, **all biblical interpretation rests upon the literal sense ...**”



Divino Afflante Spiritus

(Pius XII, September 30, 1943)

“... discern and define that sense of the biblical words which is called literal ... so that the mind of the author may be made clear.... the exegete must be **principally concerned with the literal sense** of the Scriptures.”



Literal Sense

The first sense then for understanding the Bible is the *literal sense*. The literal sense of Scripture is the meaning which the human author directly intended and the author's words convey.

Criteria to understand the literal sense:

The **literary form** that the author used is the first aid in determining what the author meant. If the author wrote poetry instead of history, then the literary form of poetry assists in determining the meaning intended by the author. Some other literary forms of the Bible include history, law, songs, love stories, stories (parables), etc.

The **literary history** of the biblical book or of the section of the Bible that contains the book also aids in determining the meaning intended by the author. Literary history of a book includes what is known about the author, his background, his historical period of Israel's history, etc.

An example of the Church using the literal sense of a scripture passage in order to understand what meaning we should get from it is the 6th chapter of the Gospel according to John.

Literary Form of John 6:25-69:

Most scripture scholars today affirm that John's gospel is historical in nature. Hence we believe that John strove to preserve both the words and actions of Jesus. Unlike the Synoptics, John wrote through the eyes of the faith of the late Apostolic Church in light of the way that faith translated into practice and worship.

Where John is clearly biographical, the literal meaning is emphasized by linguistic psychology: multiple repetition of the message in different words. Where literalness is intended, intended meaning is reinforced by recording the reaction to literal meaning by the hearers without the speaker's correction.

Literary History of John 6:25-69:

The apostle John was an eyewitness to the life and teachings of Jesus. He was one of the Twelve. He was also the last of the Apostles to write and to die. He refers to himself as the “disciple whom Jesus loved.”

Following the details of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes--biographical, Jesus walking on the sea--biographical, Jesus reacts to the crowds' need for signs. Jesus takes them from manna, bread from heaven, to “true bread from heaven (v. 32)” ... “I am the bread (v. 35).” “I am the bread that came down from heaven (v. 41).” This is God saying this: “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” If He was not really the bread that came down from heaven, His omnipotent and creative Word would then have made it so.

Five times in different verbal expressions, Jesus confirmed the reality of the meaning he intended.

John 6:51

phagete



I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.

John 6:53

phagete



Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you.

John 6:54

trogon



Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life.

John 6:55



For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink.

John 6:56

trogon



Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him.

The best way a person can make a clear literal point is repetition of the same message in different ways. Jesus did this. Those around him clearly understood what he was saying--cannibalism and the drinking of blood--both forbidden by Mosaic Law.

John 6:60,66

Then many of his disciples who were listening said, “This saying is hard; who can accept it?” ... As a result of this, many (of) his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him.

Had these disciples mistaken the meaning of Jesus' words, Jesus, knowing their thoughts and their error, would surely have known and corrected them. He didn't. They had clearly understood his meaning--Jesus' flesh was to be really eaten; his blood to be really drunk.

The Jerusalem Catecheses (Cat. 22, Mystagogica, 4,1)
written by St. Cyril of Jerusalem (Bishop of Jerusalem
and Doctor of the Church, born about 315; died probably
18 March, 386)



“Once, when speaking to the Jews, Christ said: ‘Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood you shall have no life in you.’ This horrified them and they left him. Not understanding his words in a spiritual way, **they thought the Savior wished them to practice cannibalism.**”

The Song of Solomon Illustrated

Chapters 4 and 7

How beautiful you are, my darling. How beautiful you are!

Your eyes are like doves behind your veil;

Your hair is like a flock of goats;

Your teeth are like a flock of newly shorn ewes;

Your lips are like scarlet thread;

Your temples are like a slice of pomegranate;

Your neck is like the Tower of David...built with rows of stones on which are hung a thousand shields. . .

Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle which feeds among the lilies;

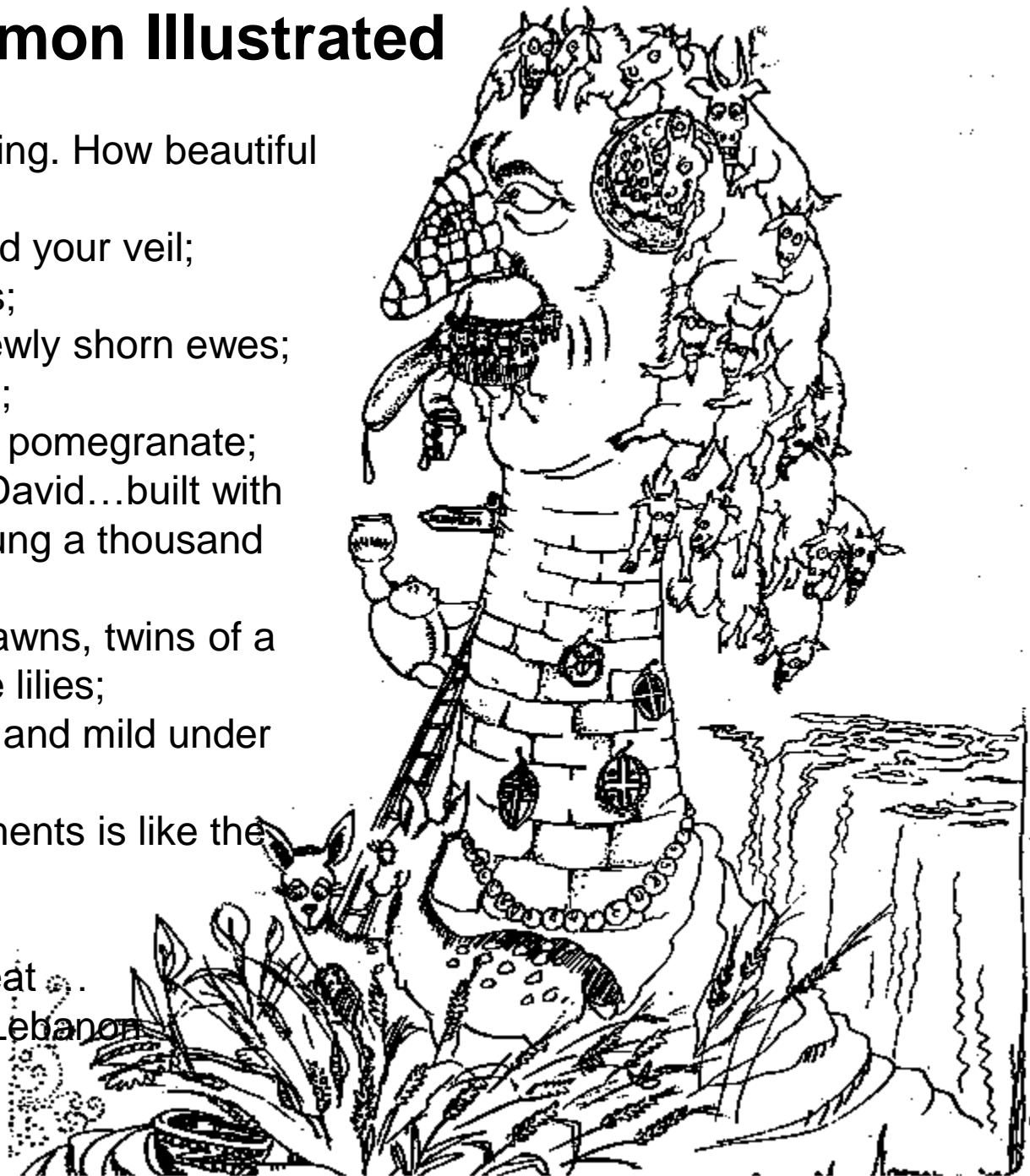
Your lips, my bride, drip honey and mild under your tongue;

And the fragrance of your garments is like the fragrance of Lebanon . . .

Your navel is a round goblet . . .

Your belly is like a heap of wheat . . .

Your nose is like the Tower of Lebanon
faces toward Damascus . . .



Fuller Sense

But the Bible has God, a divine author, besides the human author. The Church teaches that there exists a more-than-literal meaning for understanding the Bible: *a fuller sense*. The fuller sense is the deeper meaning intended by God as divine author. The fuller sense of Scripture, since it is the meaning intended by God, may not have been clearly known and intended by the human author.

Criteria to establish the fuller sense:

Because the Catholic Church holds that there are two revealing authorities of Divine Revelation, the Bible and the Holy Spirit, the fuller sense of the Bible can be found in the authoritative interpretation of those revealing authorities. Some of these authorities are the New Testament itself, the Fathers of the Church, the Church in Council (cf. Acts 15 model), the “faithful people” faithful to what was handed down to them, etc. The Spirit of Truth is entrusted to faithful people as an authority in the Church.

The fuller sense of any Scripture text has to be in agreement with the literal sense of the words. This fuller sense must be a consequential development of what the human author of the text intended to say.

An example of the fuller sense in the interpretation of Scripture is found by looking at the New Testament. In the Gospel according to Matthew, Chapter 1, verse 23, Matthew says that the conception of Jesus by Mary was a virginal conception and took place so that the words of the prophet Isaiah (7:14) might be fulfilled.

Isaiah gives no evidence that the prophet had Jesus' conception in the womb of Mary in mind. Isaiah does not speak of a virgin in the strict sense--merely an unmarried woman. Isaiah is not clear that he is even speaking to a distant future conception. The whole meaning of Isaiah's chapter appears to imply that the birth he prophesies will take place about 735 B.C. during the reign of King Ahaz the father of the future King Hezekiah.

The words of Isaiah may have literally meant the conception of the future King Hezekiah. At the time of Isaiah's words in chapter 7, the mother of the future King Hezekiah would have been unmarried.

Matthew, on the other hand, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, creates an interpretation of Isaiah which is definitely not literal. Matthew clearly interprets Isaiah in a fuller sense: the unmarried woman is the virgin Mary, and God-with-us is Jesus.

Typical Sense

Following the lead of Paul himself (cf. Rom 5:14) there is another way for creating meaning in the Bible: *the typical sense*. The typical sense of Bible texts is the deeper meaning that some elements (persons, places, things and events) of the Bible have because God, the divine author of the Bible, intended that these elements foreshadow/shadow further things.

Criteria to understanding the typical sense:

The typical sense of the Bible is created by continuing revelation or growth in the understanding the Word of God. Extra-biblical growth in understanding the Word of God is evidenced in the growth and development of the understanding of the Trinity, the Incarnation, etc.

Types--the typical sense--are discovered in the New Testament, or in the agreement among “faithful people” faithful to what was handed down to them--the Fathers of the Church, in worship-- the liturgy--and its development through the ages, in the documents of the Church, etc. The Catholic Church believes that the Holy Spirit is a revealing authority in the Church and reveals Himself to “faithful people” in all ages.

The other criterion for discovering the typical meaning of Scripture is understanding that any type found in the text of the Bible has to be related to the anti-type (e.g., Christ to Adam). This confirms that God planned the relationship of the type to the anti-type.

An example of the typical meaning in the Bible is in Paul's writings. Paul appears to delight in establishing types between the New Testament and the Old Testament. In 1 Corinthians 10:6 Paul typifies those events which occurred to the Israelites in the desert of Sinai throughout the Exodus to those things that happen to Christians.

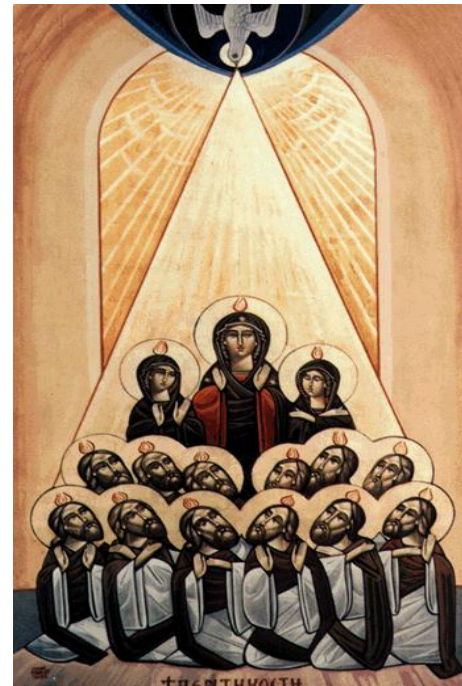
Another example of a type--the typical meaning in the Bible--is the bronze serpent raised by Moses in the desert. The evangelist John presents raising the bronze serpent as a type of Christ crucified (3:14).



Some Major Church Pronouncements on the Bible

Pentecost (30/33AD)

The beginning of the Church; the Church exists before a determination of a canon or a definitive list of books of what was later called the Bible. The NT was not even written yet. The Bible is the book of the Church, the church is not a church of the Bible.



Vatican I Council (1869-1870)

Reaffirmed the decree of Trent. The **Church holds the books of Holy Scripture as sacred and canonical**, not because she subsequently approved them, nor because they contain revelation without error, but precisely because “having been written by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author and, as such, they have been handed down to the Church itself.”



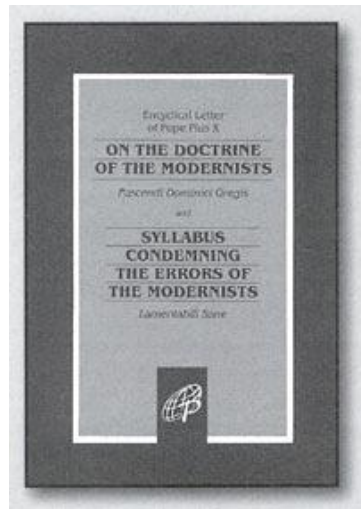
***Providentissimus Deus* (1893), Pope Leo XIII, Bishop of Rome, 1878-1903**

Inaugurated a **new era in Roman Catholic biblical studies**. Presented a **plan for biblical study**; **Defined inspiration**: “By supernatural power God so moved and impelled the human authors to write - he so assisted them in writing - that the things he ordered and those only they first rightly understood, then willed faithfully to write and finally expressed in apt words and with infallible truth.”



Pascendi Dominicae Gregis (1907), Pope Pius X, Bishop of Rome, 1903-1914

Refuted the errors of the Modernists; Scored erroneous teaching on the origin and nature of the Sacred Books, on inspiration; on the distinction between the purely human Christ of history and the divine Christ of faith; on **the origin and growth of the Scriptures.**



Spiritus Paraclitus (1920), Pope Benedict XV, Bishop of Rome, 1914-1922

Commends modern critical methods in biblical studies.

All biblical interpretation rests upon the literal sense. Goal of biblical studies is to learn spiritual perfection, to arm oneself to defend the faith, to preach the word of God fruitfully.

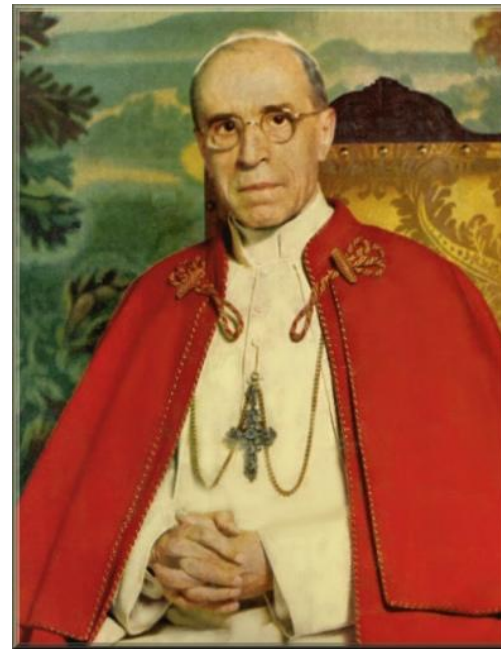
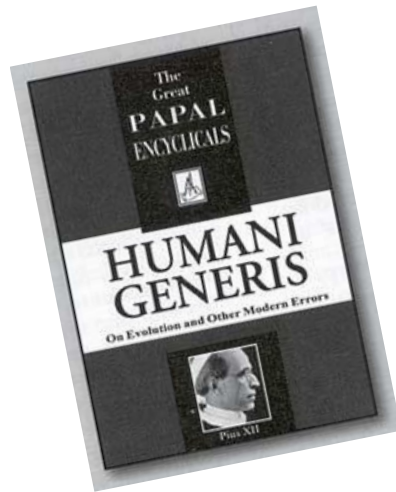


***Divino Afflante Spiritus* (1943),
Pope Pius XII, Bishop of Rome, 1939-1958**

Permitted scholars to use original text of Scriptures. No claim was made that the Vulgate is always an accurate translation, but that it is free from any errors in faith or morals. The scholar must be principally concerned with the literal sense of the Scriptures; search out and expound the spiritual sense; avoid other figurative senses. Literary criticism should be employed. Stated that there are but few texts whose sense was determined by the authority of the Church (only seven biblical passages have been definitively interpreted in defending traditional doctrine and morals--Jn 3:5, Lk 22:19, 1 Cor 11:24, Jn 20:22, Jn 20:23, Rom 5:12, Ja 5: 14); this counteracts the frequent misunderstanding that Catholics have no freedom interpreting the Scriptures.

Pope Pius XII, Bishop of Rome, 1939 - 1958

Instructs scholars on evolution, polygenism and OT historical narratives



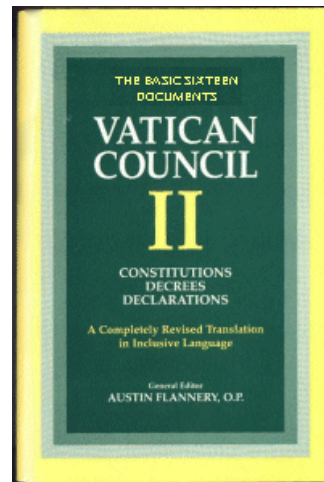
Vatican II Council (1962-1965) *On Divine Revelation*

The decree declares that there is **one source of Divine Revelation, Jesus Christ**; that there are two modes of handing on revelation: **Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition**: “In a certain way merge into a unity and tend toward the same end,” and “it is not from Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything that has been revealed.”



Concerning Inerrancy of Scripture: “The books of Scripture must be acknowledged as **teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error** that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation.”

Emphasized that “in order to see what God wanted to communicate in Scripture, we must **investigate the intention of the sacred author**, and one way to do this is by **paying attention to the literary form employed by the sacred writer.**”



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