



### Student Reading 4: Interpreting the Bible

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*"The study of the Bible is ... never finished; each age must in its own way newly seek to understand the sacred books."*

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger,  
preface to *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*,  
Pontifical Biblical Commission (April 23, 1993)

*Pat and Chris are playing tennis. Pat serves.  
'Great shot', exclaims Chris.  
'Fifteen-love' replies Pat.*

What do you picture when you read this?  
Who is playing: two women, or two men? A  
woman and a man?

When I ask this question of a group I always  
find that some have pictured women, some  
men, some a woman and a man. I also often  
find that, until I ask the question, it had not  
occurred to the group that a number of  
interpretations are possible. We read a text  
and it makes sense to us, and often we do  
not notice that it might make a different  
sense to someone else.

Different interpretations can arise because  
there are 'gaps' in the text: this text does  
not specify the gender of Chris and Pat. How  
you interpret it depends on the way in which  
you fill this gap. In some cases we "fill the  
gaps"—we "make sense" of a text—so  
quickly and subconsciously that we do not  
notice at all. At other times the process of  
making sense of what we read is more  
complicated and conscious. If there is a  
cultural gap between the text and the  
reader, communication becomes  
exponentially more difficult. If you were  
unfamiliar with the rules of tennis, what  
sense (if any) would you make of Pat's reply?

Consider this example:

*If one 'separated' [under a ban] died, the  
Beth din stone his coffin; R. Judah says, not  
that they set up a heap of stones over him  
like the heap of Achan, but the Beth din send  
[commissioners] and have a large stone  
placed on his coffin, which teaches you that  
if anyone is placed under a ban and dies in  
his "separation", the Beth din stone his  
coffin.*

(Mo'ed katan 15a)

How did you go at making sense of this text?  
This text is taken from a Jewish text called  
the Talmud. How you interpret it—whether  
it makes sense to you—depends on whether  
you are familiar with the 'technical language'  
and the cultural context from which it  
derives. What does it mean to be  
'separated'? Who or what is a Beth din?  
What does it mean to 'stone a coffin'? If we  
lack this cultural knowledge the text makes  
little sense. The Bible, like this text from the  
Talmud, comes from a cultural context very  
different from ours. Understanding that  
context can be crucial to understanding the  
text.

Sometimes texts can be difficult to  
understand even when they come from our  
own time and context. Here is an example:

*Hi,  
I'll be away all day so see you tomorrow  
sometime. I'll think about the Mike/NT part  
of things a bit more tomorrow as well and  
talk it over with him.*

*The Jews in John is a huge question. I  
like the priest thoughts. If the Christians  
were a serious challenge to their Jewish  
tradition, then it makes sense to me that the  
issue of priesthood/temple etc is going to be  
right up there.*

*Enjoy your day,*

*R*

This text makes sense to me. How did you go at making sense of it? This is an email that was sent to me some time back. I know who “R” is and I understand the short hand references. I have the context. It was, of course, never meant for anyone else. It was part of an on-going conversation, a response to an email I had sent. Since you have not seen the other emails that preceded this one you will not know what ‘the Mike/NT part of things’ refers to, or what ‘the priest thoughts’ were. You are joining in the middle of the conversation and that makes it hard to make sense of the conversation and to catch up.

There are cases in the Bible where we are in that same situation. The letters of Paul are a good example. In many cases Paul writes in response to letters or other communication he has had from congregations (see, for example, 1 Corinthians 1:11). His letters have been preserved, but the letters to which he is responding, or the reports he has received in person, are gone. We join in the middle of the conversation. As in the case of the email, there are things in Paul’s letters that he can assume his readers will know, that he doesn’t spell out.

My friend doesn’t need to repeat “the priest thoughts” – he can assume I know what they are. If my friend were writing to you, he would need to fill you in. In the case of Paul’s letters it is the same. “It has been

reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you,” Paul writes to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 1:11). “Now for the matters you wrote about...” he says later (7:1). He can assume that the Corinthians know their own letter and that they know something of the quarrels.

On one level the Bible is God’s word to us. At the same time, it was not written to us in the first instance. We join the conversation much later and we come to it from a different time and place than the people who first wrote the texts and who first received them.

Sometimes a text is edited or collated: several voices may be embedded in the one text. They may be inconsistent or even diametrically opposed to each other and they come from their own cultural and historical context – sometimes far removed from the first author’s context. For example, the book of Daniel is written in two different languages and the book of Isaiah was written over a long period of time. People sometimes talk about ‘second Isaiah’ and even ‘third Isaiah’ to refer to these other authors or editors who added to and edited the text later. In the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, we can see signs of stories being added and edited over time. Scholars refer to four different editors: the Jahwist, the Elohist, the Deuteronomist and the Priestly writer (shortened to J, E, D and P), based on different characteristics of the writings in these books of the Pentateuch.

### **Text and context**

Texts exist in contexts: the time and culture in which the text was written (its historical and cultural context), what has gone before, what occasioned the writing of the text. Why did Paul write to the Corinthians? Why did people tell the creation stories of Genesis? What was going on in the times of the various prophets that gave rise to their

oracles? All of these questions relate to what might be called ‘the world behind the text’: the world that gave rise to the text.

Interpreters also exist in contexts. Just as the various books of the Bible arose in a particular historical time and culture, so you also live in a particular historical time and culture. It shapes who you are. If the world that gave rise to the text is ‘the world behind the text’, then our own world might be called ‘the world in front of the text’. It is the world we live in, the world we bring to the text, the world in which we read and make sense of the text. When you hear the word ‘family’, you know what it means: you have a family, you encounter other families. Your experience of family shapes what you hear when you read about families in the Bible.

Our families are typically monogamous – or perhaps what might be called ‘serial monogamy’: people are married to one person at a time. This is not the case in some of the stories of the Bible. Abraham had two wives: Sarah and Hagar, and sons from each of them. Abraham’s son Isaac had two wives, Rachel and Leah and children from each of them. That might sound strange to us, but would not be strange to someone from a culture in which polygamy is the norm. Here the ‘world in front of the text’ – our world – differs from ‘the world behind the text’, the world that gave rise to the stories of Abraham and Isaac, Sarah, Hagar, Leah and Rachel.

Besides the ‘world behind the text’ and the ‘world in front of the text’ one can also consider the ‘world of the text’. You can read a novel and examine its plot, characters, literary features and so on. In the same way you can look at the Bible as a text, at its characters, plot and literary features. You can consider the world of the text, the final product, without thinking about who wrote it and when.

There are a range of different methods that can be used to help make sense of the Bible. Some explore the world behind the text; some explore the world of the text and some focus on the world in front of the text. *Exegesis* refers to this process of examining the text through careful, methodological study. It is also called biblical criticism. *Criticism* derives from the Greek word *krinein* which means ‘to judge’ or ‘to discern’. These methods enable us to make a sound judgment about, for example, the historical context of a text, or its literary features.

### Exploring the world behind the text

#### *Historical criticism*

Historical criticism<sup>1</sup> helps us to attend to the Bible’s original context. There are two sets of questions that might be asked about the historical context of the text: questions about the history *in* the text and about the history *of* the text. What historical events are described in the text? Who is talked about in the text? What else do we know about the events described in the text from other sources, for example from archaeology or from other texts?

The Bible describes Joshua walking around the city of Jericho and the walls falling down. Archaeologists have dug out the city to see whether there is evidence of the walls falling and when that occurred. This might help to shed further light on when Israel came into the land of Canaan.

One of the difficulties with any such historical research into the world of the Bible is that there is only limited external evidence. One can excavate the city of Jericho and see whether it had walls and whether they were destroyed. If they fell at around about the right time, does that mean

<sup>1</sup> This method is also called *historical-critical method*.

the story about Joshua and the walls of Jericho happened just as it is described in the Bible? If there is no evidence of the walls falling, does it mean the story didn't happen? Or perhaps just that the name of the town has changed in the course of the telling? Using historical and archaeological evidence to shed light on the historical context of the Bible is no easy task, both because of the limited data and because the interpretation of the data is rarely straightforward.

Besides asking about the history *in* the text, historians also ask about the history *of* the text. Where and when was the text written? Who wrote the text? For whom was it written? A text can tell us something about the historical time in which it was written, not just about the historical time about which it speaks. For example, when Israel went into exile in Babylon, the people continued to tell the stories about King David. How they told the story and how they interpreted the events of King David's life were shaped also by their own (much later) experience of living in exile, of losing the land, of no longer having a temple, a palace and a throne.

The history of Israel that is recounted in the books of 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings is told again in the books of 1 and 2 Chronicles. Both tell the history of David (and of the people of Israel), but the author/editor of 1-2 Chronicles lives at a different time and interprets the events and history differently. In both cases you can ask about the history *in* the text – when did David live? What were the major events of his life? In both cases you can also ask about the history *of* the text. Who wrote the books of Samuel? When did that person write these books? What was the author's purpose in writing? Who wrote 1-2 Chronicles? When did this author live? Why did this author write these books?

You might also ask whether the author of 1-2 Chronicles used the books of Samuel as a source for his own history of David. This is to ask another important question, the question of sources and redaction.

#### *Source and redaction analysis*

Authors today are expected to cite their sources, particularly if they are writing scholarly or academic works. They are also expected to use quotation marks to clearly mark their sources, and to be careful to quote their sources accurately. It is not so easy to determine sources in ancient texts, since the ancient authors did not use quotation marks and footnotes.

Reading the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke side by side, it soon becomes apparent that they are very similar in structure and wording. One copied another – but who copied whom? That is the question of sources. If you know the source, then you can also look at how the author changed or edited the source. This is called “redaction.” Scholars generally agree that Mark served as a source for Matthew and Luke. (How they arrived at this conclusion need not detain us here.) How have Matthew and Luke changed Mark? Why have they changed Mark? The answers to these questions can tell you something about what was important to Matthew and Luke.

Sometimes we have several texts that we can compare – as in the case of the Gospels or in the case of the histories of Israel in 1-2 Chronicles and the books of Samuel and Kings. Yet even when there is only one text, there can still be tell-tale signs of sources that an author has used and incorporated into a text.

I mentioned earlier that there were signs of that in the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. For example, if you read the story of Noah's ark carefully, you might find some curious oddities (see Genesis 6-8). How

many of each kind of animal does God tell Noah to take into the ark? You might be surprised if you look carefully at Genesis 6:18-20 and compare it with 7:1-4. In Genesis 6:20 God instructs Noah to take two of every kind of animal into the ark. Four verses later, Noah is told to take seven pairs of all clean animals and a pair of all unclean animals. (Jewish law divides all animals into 'clean' and 'unclean' according to particular criteria.) So... does Noah take two of every kind, or 14 of every 'clean' kind and two of every 'unclean' kind? God also tells Noah to build the ark twice and Noah gets into the ark twice (once in Genesis 7:6-10 and then again in verses 11-16.) It looks like an editor has taken two versions of the story and woven them into one.

#### *Form criticism*

The Bible contains lots of different materials – there are histories, such as the history of David, songs (for example the Psalms), parables, proverbs, laments, prophecies, letters and more. Understanding the form or genre of the text is important for its interpretation because genre creates a 'context of expectation' for interpretation.

For example, consider this one: "once upon a time in a land far, far away...". You will know this genre well. It shapes what you expect to hear. You expect that this story will end "happily ever after" and probably involve a princess or a dwarf, but not a prime minister. You expect that this will be "fiction" rather than "fact".

In the same way genre shapes our expectations of biblical texts. For example, when Matthew says that Jesus told the people many things in parables and goes on to say, "Listen, a sower went out to sow..." (Matt 13:3), we do not ask, what was the man's name? Where did he live? We understand the genre and we use it to interpret the text. Identifying the genre of a

text is an important step in its interpretation.

Consider the book of Jonah, the story of the prophet who is swallowed by a big fish. Is this an historical narrative? In that case we can ask, what type of fish was it? When did it happen? How did it happen? Some people ask such questions and dismiss the story because they conclude that it cannot have happened.

Yet the book of Jonah may not be a historical narrative at all. It may rather be a satire, a genre that sets out to expose human foolishness. The story contains much that is caricature and irony – for example, pagans who worship the true God (1:5, 14), a prophet who preaches the shortest sermon ever (a total of eight words, 3:4) in response to which an entire city of 120,000 people repents.

The story may be humorous, but the point is serious. The city that is saved is Nineveh, capital of Assyria, a bitter enemy of Israel at one point in its history. It takes the prophet Jonah a long time to learn the lesson that God wants to be gracious to the people who are the enemies of Israel. How long will it take the people to whom the story is told to learn the same lesson? How long will it take us to learn the lesson? If we misunderstand the genre, we may be distracted with questions that are beside the point (what kind of fish it was and whether it ever happened). In the process we may miss the point entirely.

#### *Socio-cultural analysis*

A more recent development in analysing the world behind the text has been a focus on the social world that gave rise to the text. For example, what were the expected rules of behaviour around eating? How did one get married? What was 'good manners' in relating to one's brothers, parents, or social inferiors?

I used an example from the Talmud earlier to highlight how difficult it can be to interpret a text if the cultural context is unfamiliar. Similarly the parable of the “Good Samaritan” (Luke 10:25-37) receives a much more radical edge if one understands something of the cultural context: who the Samaritans were and what Jews at the time of Jesus thought of Samaritans. (You can read another story about Jesus and a Samaritan in John 4, and in this case the author explains a little of this cultural context and the differences between Jews and Gentiles to help the audience make sense of the story.)

### **Exploring the world of the text**

Just as the Bible can be explored as an ancient text that reveals something of the history and culture of the people who created the text, so it can be explored as a text, as a piece of literature. A number of different methods are used to explore ‘the world of the text’.

#### *Literary criticism*

Literary, or narrative, analysis explores such features as structure, plot and characterisation in the text.<sup>2</sup> It examines the use of literary devices, for example symbolism, metaphors and hyperbole. Earlier I noted the use of irony in the book of Jonah. Identifying this literary device is an important aspect in helping to interpret the book and identify its genre.

Literary analysis can help to clarify what is important in a text, for example by identifying the climax of a story, repetition and stress. It can be an excellent way of exploring the many different facets of a

<sup>2</sup> Occasionally, in older texts, ‘literary criticism’ is used to refer to the method now known as source criticism. Particularly in studies of the Pentateuch, ‘literary criticism’ was used to refer to the study of its sources (J, E, D and P).

story, for example by exploring characterisation.

#### *Rhetorical analysis*

The texts of the Bible, like all communication, seek to affect the readers – to convince or move or persuade. Some writers are trying to change a previous opinion (some of Paul’s letters are trying to change the opinions of those to whom he is writing, for example). Some of the Psalms seek to express grief or move the audience to praise.

Rhetorical analysis sets out to answer such questions as, what is this text trying to do? How does this text try to convince? What other voices/ideas is this text responding to? How is the text responding to these voices/ideas?

### **Exploring the world in front of the text**

Besides methods that explore the world behind the text and the world of the text, there are also methods of analysis that are interested in the way in which readers make sense of the text. One way of exploring this aspect of interpretation is through *reader-response criticism* which focuses on how readers experience the text and how readers contribute to the process of meaning-making. This type of analysis can be very abstract. More concrete forms involve analysing how our own cultural contexts and our concerns shape our reading. For example, slavery was condoned for a long time using the Bible, but has also been challenged using the Bible.

#### *Contextual / Advocacy approaches*

*Contextual approaches* and *advocacy hermeneutics* have both been used as umbrella terms for such analyses of the way in which context shapes interpretation. These are not so much methods of interpretation, but approaches that use

other methods such as those outlined earlier to uncover oppressive tendencies in the Bible or its interpretation and to explore how the Bible challenges modern structures of oppression. One can read the Bible from the perspective of the poor, for example, and ask what it has to say about poverty, about liberation for the poor and about justice (liberationist approaches). How might this text serve to maintain or to challenge existing structures of power? How is this text liberating for the poor, the oppressed, the marginalised?

We can read with attention to gender, exploring what the Bible says about and to women, how women read and respond to the Bible (feminist approaches). Or we can read the Bible attentive to what it has to say about caring for the earth (environmental approaches). Environmental approaches have become so popular that alongside 'red letter editions' of the Bible (in which words of Jesus are printed in red), you can now buy 'green letter editions' in which texts that speak about God's care for the earth are highlighted in green print.

### *Canonical approach*

The various books and texts of the Bible originated independently and should be read and interpreted in the first instance in their own right, recognising and respecting that each book has its own purpose and integrity. At the same time these books are now included in 'the Bible', the canon (or collection) of sacred books for Christians. Consequently the books are now part of this larger whole and are read within the whole. While the editors of the book of Genesis cannot possibly have intended this book to be read alongside the Gospels, today they can be and are. Thus texts in the book of Isaiah are applied to Jesus, for example. The story of Israel is heard in the context of the larger story that also includes the story of Jesus and the early Church. The Gospels are

read in the context of the prophets and the entire Old Testament.

The inclusion and allusion to earlier biblical writings in later biblical writings creates 'rereadings' that give new meaning to the texts. The promise God makes to Abraham, that he and his offspring will inherit the land of Canaan (Genesis 15:7, 18) is given new meaning in the Psalms, for example, where 'entering the place of rest' no longer refers to the land of Canaan, but rather refers to entering the sanctuary of God in worship (Psalm 95; cf. Exodus 15:17). In the book of Hebrews, the promise to Abraham is interpreted as a promise of a heavenly rest and an eternal, rather than an earthly, inheritance (Heb 3:7 – 4:11; 6:13-18; 9:15).

The canonical approach is sometimes included among the advocacy approaches since it advocates a particular approach to the Scriptures (as sacred and normative for the church). Reading the biblical texts from this perspective enables us to recognise that they are part of the canon, that is, that they are inspired texts, and to read them within the whole of the Bible.

### **Conclusions**

Interpreting the Bible can be complex and perhaps seems even more difficult having considered all these different approaches and methods for making sense of the text. While mastering the various methods lies beyond the level of an introductory course, it is helpful to recognise something of the breadth and variety of questions that can be asked about a text of the Bible. Asking as many different questions as possible will yield a deeper and richer understanding of the text.

Reading and interpreting the Bible is a creative task that confronts new questions and responds to them out of the Bible. It

reads and rereads the Bible in these new contexts and with these new questions.

The Bible does not speak with a single voice: the texts arise from a range of times and authors and reflect a range of perspectives. Consequently there can be tensions between the different texts and the interpretation of the Bible must also reflect this diversity. There is no one interpretation of the Bible that can exhaust its meaning, no one interpretation that should dominate at the expense of all other interpretations.

The Bible arose out of faith communities,  
<sup>3</sup>

Interpreting the Bible is a conversation: with those who wrote the Bible and their understanding of faith, and with others in our own context. As the quote at the start of this reading said, it is never finished. The conversation continues as each generation “in its own way newly seeks to understand the sacred books.

developed in relation to faith traditions and, in turn, shaped these traditions.

Consequently the interpretation of the Bible takes place within a faith community: in the heart of the Church, ‘in its plurality and its unity, and within its tradition of faith.’

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<sup>3</sup> *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, Pontifical Biblical Commission (1993).