

Scripture

Engaging Theology: Catholic Perspectives

Scripture

History and Interpretation

Dianne Bergant

Tatha Wiley, Series Editor



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Contents

Editor's Preface	vii
Introduction	ix
Part I: In Human Words	1
Chapter 1: Out of History	3
The Tribes of Israel	3
The Monarchy	6
Postexilic Israel	10
Hellenistic Period	12
Roman Period	15
Summary	16
Chapter 2: In a Place	17
Shrines	18
Cities	21
Culture	23
Summary	27
Chapter 3: About God	28
Images of God	28
Covenant	35
Worship and Prayer	40
Summary	49
Chapter 4: From God	50
Revelation	51
Inspiration	53

“Fulfilled in your hearing” 54
Summary 55

Part II: What Did It Mean? 57

Chapter 5: What Kind of Book Is It? 59
Literary Forms 59
The Canon 67
Summary 72
Chapter 6: What Did They Believe? 73
“You will be my people” 73
“I will be your God” 78
This Age and the Age to Come 82
Canonical Form 85
“Who do you say I am?” 89
Summary 107

Part III: What Does It Mean? 109

Chapter 7: How Did They Do It? 113
Rewriting 113
Prefiguration/Typology 114
Allegory 114
Midrash 116
Theological Interpretation 117
Summary 117
Chapter 8: How Do We Do It? 119
Author-centered Approaches 120
Text-centered Approaches 131
Reader-centered Approaches 145
Summary 156

Conclusion 158

Further Reading 160

Subject Index 162

Scripture Index 169

Editor's Preface

In calling the Second Vatican Council, Pope John XXIII challenged those he gathered to take a bold leap forward. Their boldness would bring a church still reluctant to accept modernity into full dialogue with it. The challenge was not for modernity to account for itself, nor for the church to change its faith, but for the church to transform its conception of faith in order to speak to a new and different situation.

Today we stand in a postmodern world. The assumptions of modernity are steeply challenged, while the features of postmodernity are not yet fully understood. Now another world invites reflection and dialogue, and the challenge is to discover how the meanings and values of Christian faith speak effectively to this new situation.

This series takes up the challenge. Central concerns of the tradition—God, Jesus, Scripture, Anthropology, Church, and Discipleship—here are lifted up. In brief but comprehensive volumes, leading Catholic thinkers lay out these topics with a historically conscious eye and a desire to discern their meaning and value for today.

Designed as a complete set for an introductory course in theology, individual volumes are also appropriate for specialized courses. Engaging Theology responds to the need for teaching resources alive to contemporary scholarly developments, to the current issues in theology, and to the real questions about religious beliefs and values that people raise today.

Tatha Wiley
Series Editor

Introduction

What is an introduction to the Bible? While an introduction does not usually deal with simply the biblical text itself, it does prepare one to read the text with greater understanding and insight. This introduction will be best used if it is read along with the biblical text itself. Most study Bibles include outlines of the text, maps and charts, and other aids that will help in understanding. An introduction itself is not a short version of the longer work. That would be a survey or a synopsis. An introduction is concerned with questions such as: What? Who? Where? When? How? Why?

What?

Just what is the Bible? Some might say that the Bible is the word of God in human words. True—but what does that mean? Is it a collection of rules that sets the direction of our lives? Both biblical testaments do indeed contain laws and regulations, but the Bible itself is not a rulebook. Is it a compilation of teaching that we must accept? Again, there is a great deal of instruction in both biblical testaments, but the Bible is not a catechism. Is it a chronicle of the events in the lives of the people of ancient Israel and of the early Christian era? While there certainly seems to be a historical base to many of the biblical narratives, and the expression “salvation history” has long been a popular way of understanding the movement of those narratives, the Bible is not a book of history. Is it merely an assemblage of the religious literature developed by a particular ancient Near Eastern people, handed down generation after generation until people receive it today? It certainly is religious literature, but we believe that its message was inspired by God and, in a unique way, that it continues to reveal something about God even to us today.

An introduction will help us to understand *what* the Bible is. It will lead us through much of the complexity of this collection of diverse

biblical books, explaining why some books were included in the collection and considered inspired by God, and why other books were not. An introduction will help us to identify the religious importance of traditions, practices, and customs that may seem strange to us because they come from a very different culture and age. It will throw light on the meaning of various biblical-theological terms, such as inspiration, revelation, canon, and hermeneutics.

Who?

To say that the Bible is the word of God in human words raises the question of authorship. Who is the author of Scripture? *Dei Verbum* (The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation), one of the most important documents of the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II), clearly states that “the books of the Old and the New Testaments, whole and entire, with all their parts . . . have God as their author” (11). What does this mean? Did God actually take stylus or quill in hand and write down each word that we consider inspired? Or did God choose certain individuals, inspire them with a divine message, and commission them to do the writing like a stenographer, as earlier religious art often suggests? If God authored the Scriptures in either of these ways, how can the discrepancies found in the Bible be explained? For example, the first account of creation claims that light was created before the sun, the moon, and the stars. How could this be? In the Gospels of Mark, Luke, and Matthew, the adult Jesus goes to Jerusalem only once, the time he was arrested and put to death. However, in John, he travels there several times to celebrate festivals. If God is the author of the Bible, how can there be contradictions in these accounts?

An introduction will address the complicated question of biblical authorship: *who* wrote the Bible? It will show that individuals and groups of believers shaped and reshaped the religious traditions in such a way that, without denying divine involvement in the development of the biblical tradition, these human beings can be considered authentic authors in their own right. In addressing this process, this introduction will also treat the meaning and function of both inspiration and revelation.

Where?

Within the recent past, theologians have come to realize the significance of geography in the development of theology. They view geography not as merely the place where events unfold but as a factor in determining the form that theology takes. For instance, the notion

of primordial happiness conceived as a garden (Gen 2:8) would have originated only in a community that enjoyed nourishment from and delight in the fruits of the earth. Towering mountains with the majesty that they possess came to epitomize divine dignity and magnificence to those people who lived in their regal shadow. The life-giving character of running water, so valued by those who knew the cravings of thirst, became an apt analogy of the goodness and grace of God. The parables of Jesus show that he too appreciated the role that geography can play in theology. He compared the reign of God to a field into which seed had been sown, thus appealing to the farmer, or to a net cast into the sea, an image so familiar to the fisherfolk.

An introduction to the Bible will argue that geography is not an insignificant aspect of reality, particularly for people of traditional cultures like those of the ancient Near East. It will show how topography influences economic status, political struggle, national and religious identity. It will provide a sketch of the geographic landscape that played such an important role in shaping the inner landscape of the biblical people. The way they understood their relationship with God was influenced by places *where* they encountered God.

When?

One of the fundamental principles of biblical faith is the conviction that God is present and active in human history. This belief does not originate with the Christian faith. Even a cursory reading of some of the earliest Old Testament stories shows that the ancient Israelites believed that God was in their midst. For example, God spoke to Moses from the burning bush while Moses was tending the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law (Exod 3:4). Similarly, in the New Testament God called Saul as he was on his way to persecute more Christians (Acts 9:1-9). Stories like these lay bare the importance and value of human history, human interests, and human aspirations. They also show that the way we experience God, understand that experience, and speak about it are influenced by the circumstances that hold sway at the time. As with everything historical, biblical stories, directives, and proclamations all reflect the currents of thought, the customs, and the insights of the time. To grasp the meaning of the biblical passage, it is important to appreciate the circumstances of its time of origin.

An introduction to the Bible will note the major historical events that influenced the faith of ancient Israel and that of early Christianity. It will trace the most important historical trajectories that shaped the biblical

traditions. Prominent aspects of religious traditions carry the features of the times *when* they were developed. The introduction will examine these features in order to discover the meaning behind them.

How?

The answer to this question depends on one's understanding of authorship. No one can doubt that the word of God in the Bible has come down to us in human words. If God was the only authentic author of these words, then humans were merely instruments in God's hands, inscribing the words that God dictated. This raises the question of inspiration. Were the writers inspired or were the words inspired, or were both inspired? And how did this happen? If the words of Scripture are God's words, how are limited human beings able to understand them? Did God condescend to make some kind of accommodation to human frailty? Did God dictate in the language of the human author? Or are the ideas God's, but the words those of the human author? On the other hand, if the entire community was involved in shaping and reshaping of the biblical tradition, how and where does inspiration enter the picture?

An introduction will explain *how* the biblical traditions developed out of the experience of people who believed that God was present in their midst, calling them forward into lives in union with that God, guiding them as they struggled through the unknown reality of life, protecting them as they faced challenges and dangers, and forgiving them when they were unfaithful to their identity as God's own people. It will demonstrate how these traditions survived as they were reinterpreted in new situations for new generations facing new challenges. It will explain the role of inspiration throughout this entire process.

Why?

This question can be answered in various ways. First and most obviously, the ancient Israelites and the early Christians developed and handed down their religious traditions because that is what people do. They tell their stories; they proclaim their values; they decide on their customs; and they pass these on to the next generation as that generation is socialized into the ethos of the group. There is one facet of this tradition, however, that was not shared by every ancient culture. It can be found expressed in the writings of the prophets. There we find the notion of God's universal embrace of all peoples, all nations, and all cultures: "In days to come . . . all nations shall stream toward [the house of the LORD]" (Isa 2:2; Mic 4:1). The manner in which this will be accomplished

is clearly stated in the New Testament: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19).

An introduction not only will explain *how* the Bible was written but also will reveal *how* and *why* the people handed down its traditions: “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for refutation, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16). There are some questions that an introduction cannot answer, because historical or literary tools cannot probe them. They are questions of the validity of the religious claims found in the Bible. Is the perception of God found within the Bible true and valid for our time? Are the values that the Bible promotes relevant to our day? Are the aspirations worthy of our commitment? In other words, is the Bible the word of God for us? These are questions of faith. All an introduction can do is lay out the riches of the tradition. It is up to the reader to step across the threshold into the acceptance of faith.