

# Does the Bible Tell Us So?

By Margaret Nutting Ralph

When asked, “Are you familiar with the Bible?” most Catholics say, “Of course!” However, many of those same Catholics have never actually read the Bible. What they are familiar with is the Lectionary, the book that contains an arrangement of readings that have been taken out of their biblical context and placed into the context of the celebration of the liturgical year.

The Lectionary is a great gift, not only to the Catholic Church, but to the ecumenical Church. Nevertheless, if a person’s familiarity with the Bible is limited to those passages that are proclaimed during the liturgical year, that person is not really familiar with the Bible. Why? - Because that person cannot bring to the passage being proclaimed any knowledge of context. Knowledge of context is all important because, without it, we cannot understand what the inspired biblical authors were teaching. In other words, we can’t understand the revelation.

In this article I will discuss the Catholic approach to understanding Scripture, called the *contextualist* approach. First, I will establish that the contextualist approach is one of the keys to a healthy Catholic approach to Scripture. As you parish leaders know, for some reason, many adult Catholics are completely unaware of this fact. Next I will define three contexts that one must consider. They are the literary form, the beliefs of the time of the original author and audience, and the two-thousand-year process that has resulted in our present Bible. Finally, I will discuss how the contextualist approach is compatible with, and foundational to, our understanding of Scripture as a living word that cuts to the marrow of our bones and is a lamp unto our feet.

## Consider Context!

The method one should use in order to understand the revelation in Scripture was hotly contested a century ago. The Modernist controversy was in full flame. However, from a Catholic perspective, the argument was resolved in 1943 with the publication of *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, known as the *Magna Carta* of Catholic biblical scholarship. The truths taught in this groundbreaking document were reaffirmed by the Second Vatican Council in *Dei Verbum*, (*The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*; 1965), as well as in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994). The Catechism says:

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 (¶ 109).

In order to discover the sacred author's intention, the reader must take into account the conditions of their time and culture, the literary genres in use at that time, and the modes of feeling, speaking, and narrating then current (§ 110).

Different as the books which comprise it may be, Scripture is a unity by reason of the unity of God's plan, of which Christ Jesus is the center and heart... (§ 112).

Only when we have correctly understood what the original inspired authors intended to teach are we ready to understand Scripture as a living word: The Catechism calls the level of the author's intent the *literal sense* and says:

The literal sense is the meaning conveyed by the words of Scripture and discovered by exegesis, following the rules of sound interpretation: "All other senses of Sacred Scripture are based on the literal." (§ 116)

When I teach this Catholic approach to Scripture to parish adults it is not at all unusual for someone to challenge me. Many people cannot understand why, if this is what the Catholic Church teaches, they have never heard it before. All I can say in reply is that it is not age appropriate to teach what I am teaching them to anyone younger than a junior in high school. Any Catholic who did not participate in formal catechetical programs beyond middle school is not likely to have been exposed to contextual biblical interpretation. Many Catholic adults have not received good, on-going education in their faith as adults. However, it is not too late, and this information is a valuable key that, when used properly, will open the doors of understanding to many puzzling passages in Scripture.

### **Literary form**

The Bible is a library of books, not just a single book with chapters. The books in the Bible are written in different literary forms. If we misunderstand the literary form in which an author has written we are likely to make one of two mistakes: Either we will understand the subject the author is addressing but not correctly understand what the author teaches on that subject, or we will miss the subject altogether and begin to discuss topics that are irrelevant to the author's intent. An example of each of these negative consequences will make these statements clear.

### **An example of misunderstanding the teaching**

The book of Job is primarily a poetic debate framed at the beginning and end by an ancient prose legend. The debate within the book is over whether or not an innocent person could suffer, or whether all suffering is punishment for sin. The belief of the time was that all suffering was punishment for sin. However, the author, who lived about 450 B.C., disagreed with this belief. He presents an innocent person, Job, who is

suffering. He then brings Job's friends on stage and they debate the reasons for Job's suffering. Of course, the characters in the story do not know what the readers know. We know that Job is innocent because God has said so. The characters in the story do not know this. They all come to the same mistaken conclusion: Job must deserve his suffering; otherwise, God is either not all powerful or not all loving.

The inspired author knows that his contemporary audience will agree with Job's friends' reasoning. After beautifully stating his audience's convictions through the characters of Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Elihu, the author brings God on stage. God says that the friends are wrong. Job is not being punished. Job's suffering does have a purpose, just as everything has a purpose. This is evident from the order of creation. However, the purpose for an innocent person's suffering is beyond Job's (and the author's) comprehension.

If a modern reader does not know that the literary style of the book of Job is a debate, that person might open the book of Job and read a line out of the middle, not considering context, and misinterpret the meaning of the line. For instance, a person might read what Job says in his agony: "Is not man's life on earth a drudgery?/ Are not his days those of a hireling?/ He is a slave who longs for the shade,/ a hireling who waits for his wages.../ My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle;/ they come to an end without hope" (Job 7:1-2, 6). If the reader attributes these words to God, the ultimate author of Scripture, rather than to Job, a character in a debate whose point of view is different from that of God's, that person will completely misunderstand what the inspired author is teaching. The author is not teaching that Job is being punished and has no hope. In fact, he is teaching exactly the opposite.

### **An example of misunderstanding the subject**

The book of Jonah is a work of didactic fiction. The author makes perfectly clear that he is not reporting an historical by presenting his readers with a completely unrealistic plot and by writing a parody of a true prophet's call.

As the story begins, Jonah is told to go and preach to Nineveh. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, the nation that had conquered the ten northern tribes at least a century before the story was written (fifth century B.C.). By the time the book of Jonah was written, Assyria had been conquered by the Babylonians. Nevertheless, because of their history, *Nineveh* stood for *the enemy* in the minds of the Israelites. For that reason, Jonah did not want to preach to the Ninevites. He wanted them to be destroyed.

After receiving God's call, Jonah flees, gets swallowed by a fish, has a conversion experience while inside the fish, and is vomited up in perfect health three days later. Jonah says only one sentence to the Ninevites: "Forty days and Nineveh will be destroyed." In response, the king and the whole nation convert. Because the Ninevites

have repented, God decides not to destroy them after all. Jonah is furious. It is at this point that the real lesson of the story comes through.

God asks Jonah if he has a right to be as angry as he is. Jonah thinks that he does. His shade tree has been destroyed, he is hot, and God isn't going to destroy the Ninevites. God then points out to Jonah that he is concerned for the shade tree even though it cost him no labor. Shouldn't God be concerned about the Ninevites, even if they don't know their right hand from their left?

The author is teaching a very unwelcome lesson: God made everyone, and God loves everyone, even our enemies. People who misunderstand the literary form misunderstand the message. They think of this as a miracle story and begin to discuss how it would be possible for a person to survive in the belly of a fish for three days. In other words, they simply miss the point. Lack of understanding regarding the literary form results in the reader's missing the revelation about God's love that the inspired author intended to teach.

### **Beliefs of the time**

A second context that we must consider when reading the Bible is the context of the beliefs of the time of the author and audience. As Catholics, we put the authority of revelation behind the universal truth that the author is teaching, not behind various presumptions that the author and audience shared, presumptions that become evident as the author explains that core truth or applies it to a specific social setting.

An obvious example appears in the book of Job. When God comes on stage and speaks to Job God says, "Where were you when I founded the earth.../ Who stretched out the measuring line for it?/ Into what were its pedestals sunk..." (Job 38:4a, 5b-6)? The author of the book of Job presumed that the earth was flat and rested on posts. Centuries later, scientists discovered that the earth is round. However, the shape of the earth is irrelevant to the author's point: There are many things about the order of the universe that are beyond Job's comprehension, including the purpose of innocent suffering. The fact that Job does not understand the purpose of suffering does not mean that a purpose does not exist.

Throughout the history of the Church, well-meaning people have inadvertently mistreated others because they failed to separate presumptions of the time from core truths. For example, Church authorities silenced Galileo when he taught that the sun, not the earth, is the center of the movement of the planets. Another example: Slave owners defended the social structures that allowed them to own other people. It is very important that we refrain from using Scripture to address topics that inspired biblical authors were not addressing, questions that, when they are answered, will be answered by scientists, not by Scripture scholars or by theologians.

## **A process of revelation**

Although Scripture is not a single book, but a library of books, it nevertheless has an internal unity. Each part must be understood in the context of the whole. The reason for this is that Scripture is the end result of a two thousand year process through which God chose to reveal God's self. This process started with Abraham and Sarah in about 1850 B.C. and continued until about the middle of the second century A.D.

If one fails to consider this third context, one is in danger of taking an early insight, a partial truth, as the fullness of revelation when it is not. One is also in danger of thinking that Scripture contradicts itself. Again, an example will make this point clear.

As we said earlier, the book of Job argues against the idea that all suffering is punishment for sin. Where did people get that idea in the first place? One of the earliest stories in Scripture is the story of the man and woman in the garden. This story is responding to the question: "Why do human beings suffer?" It teaches that humans beings suffer because human beings sin. The man and woman act contrary to the spiritual order that God reveals to them, they eat from the forbidden tree, and they bring suffering upon themselves.

That sin causes suffering is a true spiritual insight. However, as a response to the question, "Why do human beings suffer?" it is a partial answer. When taken to be a complete answer it turns out to be false. It is true that sin always causes suffering. It is not true that all suffering is due to sin.

The inspired author of Job adds to our understanding of the answer to the question regarding the reason and purpose for human suffering: He teaches that not all suffering is due to sin, that an innocent person could suffer, and that an innocent person's suffering has a purpose. However, he does not know what that purpose is. The author lived about two hundred years before the Israelites began to consider the possibility that there is life after death, and more than four hundred years before Jesus, an innocent person who suffered and rose from the dead. In the light of Jesus' redemptive act on behalf of the human race, we now know more about the purpose of innocent suffering than did the author of Job. We see, then, that if we take an early insight and quote it as though it is the fullness of revelation that Scripture offers us, we misrepresent what Scripture as a whole teaches.

## **Scripture as a living word**

As Catholics, we believe that Scripture is a living word. Scripture speaks to us today. If we did not believe this we would not proclaim the word at every Mass and have a homily. The purpose of a homily is to put the living word in conversation with the lives of the gathered community. If we did not believe Scripture is a living word we would not break open the word with our candidates and catechumens. The purpose of breaking open the word is to put Scripture in conversation with each person's

individual life. If we did not believe Scripture is a living word we would not promote faith sharing groups based on the Sunday Lectionary readings. As Scripture itself claims, we believe that Scripture can cut to the marrow of our bones (Hebrews 4:12); it can be a light unto our paths (Psalm 119:105).

However, if we try to apply Scripture to our community lives or to our individual lives, but never ask the question, "What was the original inspired author teaching?" we do so at our own peril. We take the chance of abusing Scripture to confirm what we already think, rather than allowing Scripture to call us to conversion and to new insights regarding God's will in our lives. The living word can tell us something different than the original author was teaching, but it can never tell us something contradictory to what the original author was teaching. If we do not read the Bible one book at a time, if we do not know the literal sense of Scripture, we leave ourselves vulnerable to misunderstanding Scripture as a living word.

When teaching the importance of being a contextualist to facilitators of faith sharing groups, I often ask: How would you respond to a person who says, "I am going to be a suicide bomber because there is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friend"? Every facilitator of a faith sharing group needs to know enough about the literal sense of Scripture to recognize when a person's personal interpretation is contrary to Scripture and to be able to explain why it is contrary to Scripture.

The study of Scripture is a lifelong endeavor. No matter what age you are now, and no matter how long you live, if you devote yourself to plumbing the revelation and wisdom to be found in Scripture you will never be done. However, a first step is to read one book at a time, from beginning to end. Only after reading the books in the Bible can any of us hope to understand what God has chosen to reveal to us, communally and personally, both in the past and in the present. Only then can we truly claim, "The Bible tells me so."