

*Summary of the Document*  
*The Interpretation of the*  
*Bible in the Church*

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# Preface and Introduction

- The purpose of the document
  - To “inquire into how the meaning of Scripture might become known” by giving a “well-grounded overview of the ... present-day methods and offers...an orientation to the possibilities and limits of these approaches”
- Relevant Magisterial documents
  - *Providentissimus Deus* – Pope Leo XIII (1893)
  - *Divino Afflante Spiritu* – Pope Pius XII (1943)
  - *Dei Verbum* – Second Vatican Council (1965)

# Preface and Introduction

- The rise of new methods of Scriptural interpretation, including the “historical-critical method” brings “hidden dangers along with its positive possibilities”
- *Dei Verbum* of the II Vatican Council presents a “synthesis...between the lasting insights of patristic theology and the new methodological understanding of the moderns”

# Preface and Introduction

- The historical-critical method
  - This method is “attentive to the historical development of texts or traditions across the passage of time” (diachronic approach) and is a more ‘scientific’ approach to Scriptural study
  - Has the possibility that “only the human dimension of the word appears as real, while the genuine author, God is removed from the reach of a method which was established for understanding human reality.”
  - Also criticized for taking the understanding of Scripture out of reach of the faithful and putting it exclusively into the hands of scholars

# Methods and Approaches for Interpretation: The Historical- Critical Method

- The “proper understanding [of Scripture] not only admits to the use of this method but actually requires it”
- Through the process outlined in the historical-critical method “it is possible to understand far more accurately the intention of the authors and editors of the Bible as well as the message”

# Methods and Approaches for Interpretation: The Historical- Critical Method

- This method was used, in “much less developed” forms, by St. Jerome, St. Augustine, and Origen
- Entails four main stages
  - **Textual criticism** – examines manuscripts to find a text “as close as possible to the original”
  - **Literary criticism** - “dissecting” the text in the “quest for sources”
  - **Critical study of forms** - identifying the genre – eg. Hymn or legend
  - **Redaction criticism** -the “critical study of the process of editing” which is “attentive to the text as it has been put together” and allows for a “better grasp of the content of divine revelation” because the text “is explained as it stands”

# Methods and Approaches for Interpretation: The Historical- Critical Method

- It is a historical method because it sheds light on historic processes which took time and were complex as well as which audience the writing was directed to and their historical context
- It is scientific in that it uses “criteria that seek to be as objective as possible”
- It is analytical in that it studies “biblical text in the same fashion as it would study any other ancient text”

# Methods and Approaches for Interpretation: The Historical- Critical Method

- Evaluation

- “Once the method was freed from external prejudices, it led to a more precise understanding of the truth of sacred Scripture (cf. “*Dei Verbum*,” 12)
- “According to ‘*Divino Afflante Spiritu*,’ the search for the literal sense of Scripture is an essential task of exegesis and, in order to fulfill this task, it is necessary to determine the literary genre of texts”
- There is a necessity to include a “synchronic analysis” (looking at the text as a whole for what it is in its “final stage”) because it is this stage “which is the expression of the word of God”
- Yet diachronic study makes known the “historical dynamism which animates Scripture and sheds light on its rich complexity.”

# Methods and Approaches for Interpretation: Rhetorical Analysis

- “Rhetoric is the art of composing discourse aimed at persuasion”
- 3 approaches
  - Classical Greco-Roman
    - Investigates the **authority of the speaker**, the **force of the argument** in the discourse, and the **feelings aroused in the audience** in three different modes (judicial, deliberative and demonstrative)
  - Semitic
    - Looks at parallels in symmetrical compositions
  - “New Rhetoric”
    - “investigates what makes a particular use of language effective and successful in the communication of conviction” and penetrates “to the very core of the language of revelation”
    - Important to “rediscover or clarify original perspectives that had been lost or obscured”

# Methods and Approaches for Interpretation: Rhetorical Analysis

- Limitations
  - Can remain at simply a level of description and thus reflects “a concern for style only”
  - As a synchronic method, it cannot stand alone as a method of interpreting Scripture – it should be used with a diachronic method.

# Methods and Approaches for Interpretation: Narrative Analysis

- This method “studies how a text tells a story in such a way as to engage the reader in its “narrative world” and the system of values contained in them
- Many distinguish between the actual and implied authors and readers (the actual writer and the writer whose image is conveyed in the text and the reader the author was writing for and the reader of today) – the impact of the narrative is linked with the actual reader being able to identify with the implied reader
- Sees the text as a “mirror” in which a certain image is projected (as opposed to the historical-critical method which sees the text as a “window”)

# Methods and Approaches for Interpretation: Narrative Analysis

- This method is very useful in “facilitating the transition...from the meaning of the text in its historical context...to its significance for the reader of today”
- Limitations
  - Synchronic approach that needs to be supplemented by diachronic methods
  - Cannot exclude doctrinal sources that have commented about the texts being analyzed
  - The recognition that the poignancy of a particular passage does not necessarily mean that “its full truth has been adequately grasped”

# Methods and Approaches for Interpretation: Semiotic Analysis (Structuralism)

- 3 Main Principles
  - Principle of **immanence**: “text forms a unit of meaning complete in itself...it does not look to any date ‘external’ to the text”
  - Principle of the **structure of meaning**: “There is no meaning given except in and through relationship.”
  - Principle of the **grammar of the text**: “Each text follows...a certain number of rules or structures”
- 3 Levels of Analysis
  - **Narrative**: Looks at ‘phases’ which “mark the transformation from one state to another” and at the roles of ‘actants’ in the narrative
  - **Level of Discourse**: looks at the “elements of meaning”, tracks the course of each figure, and looks at the thematic value of the figures
  - **Logico-Semantic Level**: seeks to identify the “logic and meaning [that] underlie the narrative

# Methods and Approaches for Interpretation: Semiotic Analysis (Structuralism)

- Advantages
  - Helps people come to a better “understanding of the Bible as word of God expressed in human language”
  - Can be useful in giving “Christians a taste for studying the biblical text and discovering certain of its dimensions” and can be used in pastoral practice
- Limitations
  - Problematic when some assumptions are made (like the “refusal to accept individual personal identity”)
  - “Must be open to history”
  - Often uses “remote and complex language”

# Methods and Approaches for Interpretation: Canonical Approach

- “Reacts against placing an exaggerated value upon what is supposed to be original and early, as if this alone were authentic”
- It begins from the context of the Bible as a whole and seeks to complete the historical-critical method
- 2 perspectives: working from the final canonical form and from the “canonical process” (how the canon came to be)
- Limitations
  - Defining the canonical process
  - Being faithful to the historic context of the Old Testament which appears in different forms in Jewish Tradition and Church Tradition while at the same time placing it in the light of the Paschal Mystery

# Methods and Approaches for Interpretation: Recourse to Jewish Traditions of Interpretation

- 2 Fundamental Principles
  - “A Text only becomes a literary work insofar as it encounters readers who give life to it by appropriating it to themselves
  - “This appropriation of the text, which can occur either on the individual or community level...contributes to a better understanding of the text itself.”
- “Assesses the development of interpretation over the course of time under the influence of the concerns readers have brought to the text.”
- Limitations
  - Some interpretations have proved to be “tendentious and false” which shows that this approach cannot be autonomous
  - Emphasis cannot be placed on one historical period over another

# Methods and Approaches for Interpretation: Sociological Approach

- “This approach “has become an integral part of exegesis”
- The sociological approach helps “us understand the economic, cultural and religious functioning of the biblical world” and is “indispensable for historical criticism”
- Limitations
  - Difficult to apply sociological methods to far distant past
  - Often “pays more attention to the economic and institutional aspects of human life than to its personal and religious dimensions”

# Methods and Approaches for Interpretation: Approach through Cultural Anthropology

- Very similar to sociological approach but focuses more on language, art, and religion rather than institutions and economics – it looks at “the characteristics of different kinds of human beings in their social context”
- Helps us recognize “elements of the biblical message that are permanent, as having their foundation in human nature, and those which are more contingent, being due to the particular features of certain cultures.”
- Again, this approach cannot be autonomous

# Methods and Approaches for Interpretation: Psychological and Psychoanalytical Approaches

- Through psychology and psychoanalysis “the texts of the Bible can be better understood in terms of experience of life and norms of behavior” and bring a “multidimensional understanding of Scripture and help decode the human language of revelation.”
- Specifically, these disciplines can help explain the meaning of “cultic ritual, sacrifice, bans, and imagery”
- However, it should be cautioned that they not eliminate the reality of sin and salvation

# Methods and Approaches for Interpretation: Liberationalist Approach

- Has no particular methodology but begins from its political perspective and is “oriented to the needs of the people”
- Main principles:
  - God is the God of the poor and cannot tolerate oppression
  - Exegesis cannot be neutral but must take sides on behalf of the poor to liberate the oppressed
  - “Biblical texts are read in a context of solidarity with the oppressed”
- Values: awareness of God’s presence, communal faith; liberating praxis based in justice and love
- Risks: limited scope, one-sided, oversteps into political action, often tied with materialist doctrines and Marxist principles

# Methods and Approaches for Interpretation: Feminist Approach

- Several feminist “hermeneutics” have the same goal: “the liberation of women and the acquisition on their part of rights equal to those of men.”
- 3 forms
  - Radical form – denies all authority of Bible since it was produced by men
  - “Neo-orthodox” – sees Bible as potentially of service and prophetic as far as it takes the side of women
  - “Critical” form – rediscover the status and role of women in the life of Jesus and early Church
- Helps to detect the presence and significance of women in Scripture, and to “unmask and correct” certain faulty interpretations that justified male domination

# Methods and Approaches for Interpretation: Fundamentalist Approach

- Holds that the Bible “should be read and interpreted literally in all its details”
- Problems: refusal to take historical context of biblical revelation into account; undue stress on inerrancy of certain details; ignoring problems presented in original languages; does not take into account the development of Gospel tradition; narrow point of view; anti-Church; private interpretation

# Hermeneutical Questions

- A basic framework is necessary that “allows for the incorporation of the methods of literary and historical criticism within a broader model of interpretation.”
- There must be an interpretation that “expresses the reality of faith but also seeks to link this reality to the experience of faith in our present world.”
- “An authentic interpretation of Scripture, then, involves...a welcoming of the meaning that is given in the events and, in a supreme way, in the person of Jesus Christ.”

# Hermeneutical Questions

- The Meaning of Inspired Scripture
  - Texts are typically identified with 2 senses: literal and spiritual
- Literal sense – “that which has been expressed directly by the inspired human authors”
- Spiritual sense – “the meaning expressed by the biblical texts when read under the influence of the Holy Spirit”
  - Needs to be founded upon the literal sense
- Fuller sense – “a deeper meaning of the text, intended by God but not clearly expressed by the human author.”

# Characteristics of Catholic Interpretation

- Catholic exegesis “makes use of the scientific methods and approaches which allow a better grasp of the meaning of texts.”
- It is placed “within the living tradition of the church, whose first concern is fidelity to the revelation attested by the Bible.
- Runs the risk of “attributing to biblical texts a meaning they do not contain but which is the product of a later development within the tradition.

# Characteristics of Catholic Interpretation

- The formation of the canon was a long process but the Church “was also discerning and defining her own identity.”
- All members of the Church have role of interpreting Scripture – they must “assist the faithful to understand and discern what the word of God is saying to them.”

# Characteristics of Catholic Interpretation

- The task of the exegete
  - Must pay attention to “historical – critical method”
  - In carrying out their task, exegetes help others “arrive at the true goal of their work.”
  - Exegetes should also “explain the Christological, canonical, and ecclesial meanings of the biblical texts”
  - Creates...”a more lively and precise awareness of the historical character of biblical inspiration”
  - Helps theologians avoid dualism and fundamentalism
  - Publications are important, especially for those who are able to popularize their exegesis and make it available for the laity

# Interpretation of the Bible in the Life of the Church

- Bringing the Scriptures to “the contemporary situation of the people of God”
  - “Go beyond the historical conditioning so as to determine the essential points of the message
  - Tradition both protects the truth from deviation and “ensures the transmission of the original dynamism”
  - Methods
    - Hear the word from one’s concrete situation
    - Identify aspects of the present situation highlighted by text
    - Draw from the fullness of meaning of the biblical text

# Interpretation of the Bible in the Life of the Church

- Inculturation brings the Word, not only to today's society (actualization) but to the diversity of cultures
- Keeping the word at the heart of the Liturgy is essential
  - The Eucharistic Celebration “brings about the most perfect actualization of the biblical texts...written text thus becomes living word.”
- Lectio divina, praying with the Scriptures on an individual or communal level – “prayer should accompany the reading of Scripture”

# Interpretation of the Bible in the Life of the Church

- Scripture in Pastoral Ministry
  - 3 main situations
    - Catechesis
      - “Should proceed from the historical context of divine revelation so as to present...in the light of God’s overall plan.”
      - Should be done to facilitate encounter with Christ
    - Preaching
      - “It is...fitting to explain the central contribution of texts, that which is most enlightening for faith and most stimulating for the progress of the Christian life”
    - Biblical apostolate
      - “has as its objective to make known the Bible as the word of God and source of life”
      - Always presenting the Word with the “respect it deserves”