

# The Principles of Catholic Biblical Scholarship



The Church's most extensive and authoritative teaching on the Scriptures is found in the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation. It often is referred to by its first words in Latin, Dei Verbum (The Word of God), abbreviated below as DV.

Dei Verbum #12 (see also CCC, 109-114) offers principles for Catholic biblical scholarship. In the first place, it firmly endorses the methods of historical-critical exegesis:

To search out the intention of the sacred writers, attention should be given, among other things, to **"literary forms."** For truth is set forth and expressed differently in texts which are variously historical, prophetic, poetic, or of other forms of discourse. The interpreter must investigate what meaning the sacred writer intended to express and actually expressed in particular circumstances by using contemporary literary forms in accordance with the situation of his own time and culture. For the correct understanding of what the sacred author wanted to assert, due attention must be paid to the customary and characteristic styles of feeling, speaking, and narrating which prevailed at the time of the sacred writer, and to the patterns [people] normally employed at that period in their everyday dealings with one another

Literary forms: Particular different kinds of writing in the Bible. The reader must be aware of the type of writing or literary form being used. For example, is its form that of a letter, poetry, historical narrative, law, or allegory (and so forth)?

The Bible evolved over some 1200 years and almost every book includes earlier oral and written traditions. Sometimes the process took many centuries (in the case of the **Pentateuch**) or in the case of the Gospels, several decades. The written text is the third stage of development that followed the oral traditions or earlier writings. The first stage in each text is the events that gave rise to the traditions. Therefore, in line with DV #12, historical-critical **exegesis** operates on three levels:

Pentateuch: The first five books of the Bible.

Exegesis: The process of studying Biblical texts with a proper and formal approach or method.

1. At the final or third stage – the writing – it tries to establish, as far as possible, the intention, meaning and message of the original authors. Using this or that literary form, what did the biblical authors intend to say to their audience? In the contexts in which they wrote and using the resources of their culture, what did the sacred writers have in mind?

2. As regards the second stage, it tries to identify the nature of the oral traditions formed and handed on prior to the composition of the texts. What function did these oral traditions have?
3. Finally, historical-critical exegesis also attempts to go back to stage one: the actual events that gave rise to **the oral tradition** and written text.

Tradition: The process and content of handing on the Scriptures, teachings, liturgy, and practices through the ages.

This exegesis is historical, because it tries to go back to the historical contexts in which the biblical texts were fashioned. This exegesis is critical, because it requires professional knowledge and judgment to determine, even to some extent, what the writer wanted to communicate and what sources were used.

DV #12 adds a second principle that should guide the work of exegetes in understanding and explaining the meaning of Scripture. The principle is that “Holy Scripture must be read and interpreted in the same Spirit through whom it was written”. The Holy Spirit inspired the original writing of the Scriptures and should inspire one’s reading and interpretation today. In this sense, exegesis has a spiritual dimension. The Holy Spirit links the past formation of the sacred texts and their present interpretation.

To explain this ‘spiritual’ principle for biblical interpretation, Dei Verbum mentions three rules:

1. Attention to the content and unity of the entire Bible, unified by God’s plan, of which Christ Jesus is the centre and heart.
2. Attention to the living tradition of the whole Church, for Scripture is written principally in the Church’s heart which carries Tradition, the living memory of God’s Word; and
3. Attention to the harmony that exists between elements of the faith.

The teaching on biblical scholarship in Dei Verbum integrates reason and faith: the right use of historical-critical reasoning and the appropriate attention to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

1. The first aspect keeps a certain critical distance as it reads a text in a scholarly way (the ‘world behind’ and the ‘world of’ the text).
2. The second aspect means the text addresses and transforms the reader (the ‘world in front of the text’). It is the difference between grasping the meaning of the text and being grasped by its meaning, or between finding the truth and being found by it (O’Collins, 1991).

When the Three Worlds of the Text approach is used in an integrated way, it reflects the principles of Dei Verbum. The world ‘behind’ and the world ‘of’ the text call for proper enquiry and study and the world ‘in front of’ the text calls on the reader to be grasped by its meaning. Dei Verbum is a reminder for the teacher that the study of the Bible in Religious Education, though rigorous and appropriately academic, is always more than a ‘text’. It is never detached from the faith it expresses, the tradition that formed it, the Church that believes, celebrates,

lives and prays it, and its capacity to transform the reader, irrespective of the reader's predispositions and prior knowledge.

## Methods of Biblical Criticism

Biblical criticism—or biblical study—is the process of making informed judgements about biblical literature. The word 'criticism' does not imply anything negative; the word comes from the Greek word for judgement. Matters for scholarly 'judgement' include the dating, authorship, historical background, sources, literary forms and meaning of texts. Some methods are:.

1. Efforts to establish the original and most authoritative text—**textual criticism**. Textual criticism involves reconstructing biblical texts by *comparing and contrasting* manuscripts and translations in order to establish the original wording and therefore the most authoritative text.
2. Efforts to establish the oral and written sources a biblical author used—**source criticism**. Source criticism is an analysis that identifies the oral and written source materials of Biblical texts, especially the Gospels.
3. Efforts to study the text as a work of literature, considering its style, structure and distinctive language and literary forms—**literary criticism**. Literary criticism is the critical study of a biblical text the text as a work of literature, considering its style, structure and distinctive language and literary forms.
4. Efforts to study the literary form of a text (eg, **myth**, narrative, hymn, parable) in its oral stage and original life setting—**form criticism**. Form criticism is the classification of the genres of texts. It traces the evolution of literary units through their oral proclamation to final writing in order to identify their original life situations and social contexts. (See the chart below).
5. Efforts to study how the final author (the 'redactor') assembled the text in order to express its theological emphasis—**redaction criticism**. Redaction criticism is the analysis of the way Gospel authors edited their material to amplify their theological purpose and meaning.

Myth: A story with symbolic and metaphoric language that expresses a deep religious truth about God and human existence.

## Biblical Fundamentalism

The teaching of Dei Verbum and Catholic biblical interpretation do not accept a naïve, literalist fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible. Biblical **fundamentalism** insists that every detail the Bible should be read and interpreted in a literalist way. It

Fundamentalism: An approach to the Bible that sees that what it says is always and only literally true as stated.

tends to treat the biblical text as if it had been dictated word for word by the Holy Spirit.

Fundamentalism, unlike Catholic Biblical interpretation, pays no attention to literary forms and to the human ways of thought, language and figurative expressions found in biblical texts, many of which are the products of processes extending over long periods and very diverse historical situations. As a result, it often treats as factual history material which from the start never claimed to be historical. It confuses the divine substance of the Biblical message with what are in fact its human limitations.

Fundamentalism separates the interpretation of the Scriptures from the tradition of the faith community. It fails to realize that the New Testament took form within the Christian church and that it is the Holy Scripture of this church, the existence of which preceded the composition of the texts.

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## Basics of the Historical-Critical Method

| What Happened in History   | Stage  | How We Study It            |
|--|--|----------------------------|
|  | Jesus uses parables<br>(example, parable of the sower<br>Matthew 13:3-9)                                   |                            |
| Various hearers repeat the parable to one another, possibly for more than one generation, for example person A tells it to person B who then tells person C and so forth.  | ↓  | <b>Form Criticism</b>      |
|  | An oral tradition exists of what Jesus said  |                            |
| The collection of parables is written down and circulates apart from any gospel—all the parables in Matthew 13, for example.   | ↓  | <b>Source Criticism</b>    |
|  | A written collection of parables is in circulation   |                            |
| An author takes the collection of parables, other collections of sayings or deeds, and information from his own knowledge and creates a final gospel text, putting the material in order, placing emphasis on certain topics, creating transitions and modifying specific vocabulary to fit his themes. <sup>1</sup> | ↓  | <b>Redaction Criticism</b> |
|  | A final gospel text (Matthew)  |                            |
| Matthew is copied by hand many times, with some copies preserved. Different copies contain different errors.   | ↓  | <b>Textual Criticism</b>   |
|  | A copy of the Greek text of Matthew is prepared for a translator, such as in a modern Greek New Testament. |                            |

1. The parables are commonly thought to have been collected first in Mark or in a source before Mark, and then copied to Matthew and Luke. There were some independent parables (Luke 16, for example).