

The Catholic Answers Guide to Navigating the Bible



Catholic Answers

The Bible, the Word of God, and You

By Jimmy Akin

The Bible can be intimidating.

It's a big, thick book—much longer than most books people read. It's also ancient. The most recent part of it was penned almost 2,000 years ago. That means it's not written in a modern style. It can seem strange and unfamiliar to a contemporary person. Even more intimidating is that it shows us our sins and makes demands on our lives.

No wonder some people hesitate to take the plunge and start reading the Bible!

But each of the things that can make it intimidating is actually a benefit:

- Because the Bible is so large, it contains a great deal of valuable information. If it were short, it wouldn't tell us nearly as much.
- The fact that it was written so long ago testifies to its timeless message. Its teachings aren't tied to just one time or culture. They have endured, and by reading Scripture we experience the joy of discovering the story of God's dealings with mankind.
- Finally, it's important that it reveals our sins to us. We need wake-up calls that shake us out of our feeble attempts to rationalize what we're doing wrong. And Scripture is quick to assure of us God's love for us. *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life"* (John 3:16).

The Bible is an inestimable gift from God. It's his word in written form—something each of us should cherish and study regularly.

Some groups of Christians try to claim the Bible for themselves. They make it sound like the Catholic Church is opposed to Scripture. Some even claim that the Church "hates" the Bible. But as you'll see, all Christians owe an enormous debt to the Catholic Church, for it was through the Church that the Bible was given to the world.

Jesus himself founded the Catholic Church. He appointed its first leaders, and they were the ones who—under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit—wrote the books of the New Testament, which completed and became the capstone of all the scriptures that had come before.

The Holy Spirit then guided the Catholic Church to discern which books belonged in the Bible and which did not. This involved the crucial process of sorting the true scriptures from all of the false ones that existed.

The Catholic Church laboriously copied the scriptures in the age before the printing press, when every book—including lengthy ones like the Bible—had to be written by hand. It thus preserved these books down through the centuries, unlike so many ancient works that have now been lost.

The Catholic Church is why we have the Bible today, and everyone should be grateful for the gift that, by the grace of God, it has given to the world.

How to Read Scripture Like Jesus and the Apostles

By Steve Kellmeyer

“We need to read Scripture the way God intended it to be read,” said one of my friends from amid piles of concordances, grammar books, and Greek and Hebrew dictionaries. “Hey, why are you laughing?”

He didn’t see the incongruity. While the tools he has at his disposal are useful, they weren’t at Augustine’s elbow, nor at Paul’s. Scripture does not describe Jesus whipping out a grammar book on the road to Emmaus.

We don’t need to be ancient language scholars in order to read Scripture as Jesus and the apostles did; we need only a good translation and an ear for the four-fold sense.

Before you read any further, get out your copy of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and read (or, hopefully, re-read) 115–118. The concept of Scripture’s two-fold meaning presented here is grounded in a solid understanding of Jesus’ dual natures and in how he came to have those dual natures. Because Jesus is the Logos, the Word of God incarnate, and Scripture is the word of God written, there is a correspondence between who Jesus is and what Scripture is. Jesus Christ has two natures, a fully human nature and the fully divine nature. His human nature is a conduit for his divine nature—that is, everything he did as a man reflects or portrays some aspect of the invisible God.

Scripture works in a similar way. The Catechism speaks of two senses in Scripture: the literal sense and the spiritual sense. The spiritual sense, in turn, is made up of three kinds: the allegorical (or “typological” sense), the moral (or “tropological” sense), and the anagogical (or “heavenly”) sense.

Thus Scripture, the book that tells us about Jesus, also has two “natures”: a literal meaning and a spiritual meaning. We might summarize things this way:

The **literal sense** of Scripture is the meaning conveyed by the words, discovered through sound interpretation. All other senses of Scripture are based on the literal. This literal sense accurately describes what took place. It also points us to deeper spiritual meanings.

The **allegorical sense**, especially of the Old Testament, signifies a foreshadowing or “type” that will be fulfilled by Christ in the New Testament. That is, the Old Testament event points us to something Jesus did or made clear in the New Testament.

The **moral sense** of the Old Testament is recorded for our instruction. It moves the Christian to act justly in the life of the Church by indicating to us what ought to be done.

The **heavenly sense** of the Old Testament leads us towards heaven and our fulfillment in heaven in the way that it tells us about the coming of Jesus.

These senses apply most clearly in the Old Testament but may be used in the New Testament as well.

How does this work in practice?

We begin by observing certain similarities between Old Testament and New Testament passages.

In Genesis 1:1–2 and Matthew 3:16 the Spirit of God descends on water—the seas of the formless earth in the first case and the waters of the Jordan River at Christ’s baptism in the second. At first glance, that is the only correspondence between the two passages. However, further reading and reflection reveal that these are the only two places in Scripture that describe the Spirit of God moving over water. Because the Old Testament points to the New, and we have found a unique correspondence between these two passages, it seems reasonable to conclude that the Genesis passage is meant to help us interpret the passage in Matthew.

We can see the correspondences in each sense of Scripture. The *literal sense*: Each passage describes something that actually occurred—the Spirit of God moved over the waters. The *allegorical sense*: The description of the original creation of the world foreshadows the new creation we become through the sacrament of baptism. The *moral sense*: Just as creation was “baptized” into existence, so we must be baptized in order to become a new creation in Jesus Christ. The *heavenly sense*: In this baptismal (re)generation, God adopts us as his child, a beloved son or daughter in whom he is well-pleased, and brings us into union with him. Thus the story of creation in Genesis tells us that, from the very beginning, even before God formed man, God always intended created man to be in unity with him, and that he accomplishes this unity through baptism.

If this is a valid way to read Scripture, we should find evidence for such readings within Scripture itself; and so we do.

Look at 1 Kings 18:20–40. Elijah forces the people of Israel to choose either Baal or Yahweh as their god by proposing a test: The prophets of Baal should each slay a bull and set it on dry wood, and Elijah would do the same. They should call on the name of Baal and Elijah on the name of God, and *“who answers by fire, he is God”* (1 Kings 18:24). Baal’s prophets prayed to him all morning to no avail, though they cried aloud and slashed themselves with swords. Then Elijah repaired the altar of the Lord that had been thrown down by replacing the twelve stones on which it was built (one for each tribe of Israel). After he had people fill four jars with water, douse the slain bull and the wood three times, Elijah called in the name of the Lord. *“Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust”* (1 Kings 18:38). The people believed and Elijah had the prophets of Baal seized and killed.

In this rich scriptural passage, Elijah stands for Christ. He builds the altar upon the foundation of the twelve tribes (apostles). The wood on the altar represents the wood of the Cross; the bull represents the sacrificial offering Christ made of himself. The four jars of water represent the four Gospels, and the water itself represents the washing of baptism. The fire of the Lord is the consuming fire of God’s love, which transforms the very substance of the elements offered on the altar until all is taken up in God. This complete acceptance of the sacrifice, together with the punishment meted out to the prophets of Baal, is a foretaste of the end-times, when Jesus will return to judge each according to his works. The passage foreshadows both the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist and demonstrates the importance of the priesthood. For another passage related to the priesthood, think about the correspondences between what happens to Jesus in his passion, death, and Resurrection and what happens to Peter in Acts 12.

In 1 Samuel 16:1–12, the interpretation revolves around the fact that the word “Bethlehem” means “House of Bread.” Samuel is told by God to go to Jesse’s house in Bethlehem and anoint a new king. If anyone asks why he is going, Samuel is to tell him that he is offering a sacrifice that involves a banquet meal. Every attendee of the banquet had to be ritually clean. Upon entering the House of Bread, Samuel incorrectly identifies who is to be king. As a result, God warns him not to judge by appearances when looking for the King in the House of Bread but to rely on God, who judges what is in the heart. Seven of Jesse’s sons appear, but none are suitable. It is only the eighth son who is suitable. It is useful to recall that Jesus rose one day after the seventh (Sabbath) day, that is, on the eighth day. Thus, when we go to the House of Bread looking for the King, we are not to judge by appearances but rather by what is in the heart—what is really there. When we do, we will find the Son of the eighth day, and we will know our King. The entire story points to the Eucharist.

Note that 1 Chronicles 11:16–19 and 2 Samuel 23:14–17, which also refer to Bethlehem, have similar Eucharistic overtones. In those passages, water is obtained from the cistern of Bethlehem through the work of three mighty persons. David connects Bethlehem's water with their blood and pours it out on the ground as the priests do the blood libations at the altar.

Proverbs 1:1–6 provides additional confirmation. In this passage, Solomon tells us that he is writing the book of Proverbs in order to teach us how to understand a proverb: That is, he will use proverbs to explain proverbs. Jesus was a wiser man than Solomon (cf. Mt 12:42), and he taught constantly using parables (Matt. 13:34–35). Yet Scripture witnesses again and again how he had to explain every figure he used (e.g., John 10:6). This is important for two reasons.

First, it confirms what both Luke and Matthew were inspired to record about Jesus: *"the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light"* (Matt. 4:16, Luke 1:79). Many of the people of Christ's time, who lived under the Old Testament dispensation, were incapable of reading Scripture with the necessary New Testament understanding. Their minds needed to be enlightened to understand the parable they and their ancestors daily lived out.

Second, as Matthew 13:10 records, Jesus gave the apostles the ability to understand what the Old Testament "parables" pointed to. Indeed, Jesus promises exactly that in John 16:25—there would come a time when he would speak to them plainly and not in any figure. However, he makes this promise just scant hours before the Twelve break and run like water. The promise is fulfilled only after the Resurrection: *"Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures"* (Luke 24:45).

Unfortunately, not all new Christians shared this apostolic gift. The Thessalonians in Acts 17 who rejected apostolic guidance in how to read Scripture continued on in darkness, while the Bereans, who desired the full understanding of Scripture, were unable to attain it without the guidance first of Paul and then of Silas and Timothy. Scripture itself underscores the extent to which this apostolic guidance is necessary. No person or group of people in Scripture attained an accurate understanding of who Jesus was or what he did without authorized guidance, despite the fact that knowledge of Jesus was widespread (*"This thing was not done in a corner"* [Acts 26:26]).

This apostolic gift explains why the epistles are rich in the four-fold sense of Scripture. The whole letter to the Hebrews, especially passages like 8:4–5, 9:24, and 10:1, refer repeatedly to the Old Testament through the four-fold sense. And though Colossians 2:16–17, Galatians 4:24–30, 2 Peter 2:6, James 5:10, and Jude 7 all demonstrate the concept, 1 Corinthians 10:1–11 shows the principle at its clearest.

Here Paul talks of the Israelites being "baptized into Moses" when they crossed the Red Sea, yet Exodus never speaks of this. Similarly, Exodus does not describe any food or drink

as “supernatural,” nor does it describe a rock that followed the Israelites. Paul is seeing the Old Testament in a new way. This is why he lists several of the excesses of the Israelites and remarks, *“Now these things happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come”* (1 Cor. 10:11).

The Old Testament is written for our instruction. It is a morality play in which every event really happened and at the same time points beyond itself to eternity. Peter, Paul, James, Jude —each was inspired by God to demonstrate this new clarity of vision. Through the epistles, God shows us that the four-fold sense of Scripture is necessary for an accurate understanding of New Testament events. Indeed, even simple references to Jesus like “Lamb of God,” “the Good Shepherd,” and “the Paschal Victim” are shallow at best outside of the four-fold sense.

The apostles, through the assistance of the Holy Spirit, were inspired to begin unlocking the scriptures. This process continued throughout the early Church. The great Christians of the first millennia knew the technique intimately and wielded it like a two-edged sword against heretical opponents. They saw the apostolic reading of the Old Testament as the beginning of a process they were to bring to fruition.

This is why we never see Jesus or the apostles whipping out a dictionary to check the gender of a noun or the aorist tense of a verb. Paul never diagrams a sentence. The task begun by Jesus and the apostles is not yet complete—indeed, it may never be complete. It is still necessary for us today to search out the four-fold sense of Scripture in order to grasp the fullness of the divinely intended meaning in the Old and New Testaments.

Which Translation of the Bible is the Best?

By Trent Horn

Some people mistakenly think the King James Version of the Bible (KJV), with its eloquent thee’s and thou’s, is the original version. But the Bible was not written in seventeenth-century Old English. More than 1,500 years earlier, the New Testament was written in ancient Greek; and long before that the Old Testament was written in ancient Hebrew, along with some Aramaic and Greek (the Old Testament was later translated into the Greek Septuagint).

As time went on, all these texts were translated into Latin, which is the official language of the Church, as well as popular languages like German, French, and English. Today, the entire Bible has been translated into more than 500 languages, and most languages offer several different translations.

It’s important to remember that there is only one version of the Bible, but there are many different translations of it. How can this be? The art of translation is not as simple as taking

a word in one language and then using a dictionary to find the equivalent word in another language. Translators have differing opinions about how words and phrases in a text should be reproduced into another language that has different vocabulary, different rules of grammar, and embodies different cultural attitudes than the language of the text their translating.

Formal equivalence translations

One approach they use is called formal equivalence, and it strives to communicate the original words the author used. The most formally equivalent translations of Scripture would be interlinear Bibles that replace the original words in the biblical text with their modern counterparts. Using an interlinear translation, John 3:16, one of the most famous verses in Scripture, sounds like this: *"Thus indeed loved God the world that the Son the only begotten he gave that everyone believing in him not should perish but might have life."*

As you can see, interlinear translations sound stilted and can be confusing, because they take words that made sense in one language and transfer them into another language without considering that language's grammar. Most formally equivalent translations change the order and kinds of words that are used in order to help modern audiences understand the author's original meaning. The Catholic Revised Standard Version (RSV), which tends to be formally equivalent in its translation, renders the passage in this way: *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."*

Dynamic equivalence translations

Another approach to translation is dynamic equivalence, which strives to communicate the original idea the author intended to convey, even if it does not use his original words. Some translators prefer this approach, because the author's original words may not have the same meaning or not be as recognizable today and so newer words are used to better communicate his original idea. This can be seen in translations that render the Greek word *dikaiosis* "*considered righteous*" instead of the traditional term "*justified*," as in James 2:24: *"a man is justified [or in other translations, 'considered righteous'] by works and not by faith alone."*

The Message is another example of this approach, especially since it is not technically a translation of the Bible. It is more of a paraphrase that summarizes what the translator, in this case Eugene H. Peterson, thinks the Bible means or what he thinks Jesus would say to people today. In his translation, John 3:16 reads: *"This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life."* Matthew 6:11 is another striking example. The RSV renders it, *"Give us this day our daily bread,"* but The Message renders it, *"Keep us alive with three square meals."*

Dynamically equivalent and paraphrased translations may be easier for a modern person to understand, but there is a danger that the reader will encounter only the interpretations of the translator and not the words of the sacred author. This can lead to faulty interpretations of the text due to the translation's misleading language. For example, in John 3:16, the Greek phrase *zoe aionion* literally means "*life eternal*" or "*eternal life*." The Message's translation "*whole and lasting life*" could cause readers to think faith in God's son will make them live for a long time but not forever.

Not even equivalent translations!

Sometimes a translator's theology will cause him to mistranslate a text in order to justify his beliefs. This is evident in the New World Translation of the Bible that Jehovah's Witnesses use. The first verse of John's Gospel does not say, as it does in the RSV, "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*" Instead it says, "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was a god.*" That's because Jehovah's Witnesses deny the deity of Christ and think he is just "a god" or a glorious creation of the one almighty God Jehovah. (For more on how to answer their arguments, see my booklet 20 Answers: Jehovah's Witnesses).

Although Catholics should be wary of non-Catholic translations of Scripture (especially since they usually lack the deuterocanonical books of the Old Testament), there is no single translation of the Bible that all Christians must accept to the exclusion of others. An audience of people at Mass may appreciate a more dynamically equivalent translation of Scripture, such as the New American Bible, that refrains from using complex or outdated words that could obscure the author's meaning. Someone studying Scripture, on the other hand, may appreciate a formally equivalent translation such as the RSV that uses words that best reproduce what the sacred author was trying to say in his own language.

Perhaps the most on-point answer to the question "Which translation of the Bible is the best?" comes from the founder of Catholic Answers, Karl Keating: "The one you will read."

How Do You Know What Belongs in the Bible?

By Karl Keating

The most overlooked part of the Bible, apologetically speaking, is the table of contents. It does more than just tell us the pages on which the constituent books begin. It tells us that the Bible is a collection of books, and that implies a Collector. The identity of the Collector is what chiefly distinguishes the Protestant from the Catholic.

Douglas Wilson knows this. Writing in *Credenda Agenda*, a periodical espousing the Reformed faith, he notes that "*the problem with contemporary Protestants is that they have no doctrine of the table of contents. With the approach that is popular in conservative Evangelical*

circles, one simply comes to the Bible by means of an epistemological lurch. The Bible 'just is,' and any questions about how it got here are dismissed as a nuisance. But time passes, the questions remain unanswered, the silence becomes awkward, and conversions of thoughtful Evangelicals to Rome proceed apace."

Most Protestants are at a loss when asked how they know that the 66 books in their Bibles belong in it. (They are at an even greater loss to explain why the seven additional books appearing in Catholic Bibles are missing from theirs.) For them the Bible "just is." They take it as a given. It never occurs to most of them that they ought to justify its existence.

All Christians agree that the books that make up the Bible are inspired, meaning that God somehow guided the sacred authors to write all and only what he wished. They wrote, most of them, without any awareness that they were being moved by God. As they wrote, God used their natural talents and their existing ways of speech. Each book of the Bible is an image not only of the divine Inspirer but of the all-too-human author.

So how do we know whether Book A is inspired and part of the canon while Book B is not? A few unsophisticated Protestants are satisfied with pointing to the table of contents, as though that modern addition somehow validates the inspiration of the 66 books, but many Protestants simply shrug and admit that they don't know why they know the Bible consists of inspired books and only inspired books. Some Protestants claim that they do have a way of knowing, a kind of internal affirmation that is obtained as they read the text.

Wilson cites the Westminster Confession—the 1647 Calvinist statement of faith—which says that the Holy Spirit provides "*full persuasion and assurance*" regarding Scripture to those who are converted. The converted, says Wilson, "*are in turn enabled to see the other abundant evidences, which include the testimony of the Church.*"

But the "*testimony of the Church*" cannot be definitive or binding since the Church may err, according to Protestant lights. (Protestants do not believe the Church is infallible when it teaches.) What really counts is the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. Without it, the Protestant is at a loss—but, even with it, he is at a loss.

When young Mormon missionaries come to your door, they ask you to accept a copy of the Book of Mormon. You hesitate, but they say that all they want is for you to read the text and ask God to give you a sign that the text is inspired. They call this sign the "burning in the bosom." If you feel uplifted, moved, prodded toward the good or true—if you feel "inspired," in the colloquial rather than theological sense of that word—as you read the Book of Mormon, then that is supposed to be proof that Joseph Smith's text is from God.

A moment's thought will show that the "burning in the bosom" proves too much. It proves not only that the Book of Mormon is inspired but that your favorite secular poetry is inspired. You can get a similar feeling anytime you read an especially good novel (or, for

some people, even a potboiler) or a thrilling history or an intriguing biography. Are all these books inspired? Of course not, and that shows that the “burning in the bosom” may be a good propaganda device but is a poor indicator of divine authorship.

Back to the Protestant. The “full persuasion and assurance” of the Westminster Confession is not readily distinguishable from Mormonism’s “burning in the bosom.” You read a book of the Bible and are “inspired” by it—and that proves its inspiration. The sequence is easy enough to experience in reading the Gospels, but I suspect no one ever has felt the same thing when reading the two books of Chronicles. They read like dry military statistics because that is what they largely are.

Neither the simplistic table of contents approach nor the more sophisticated Westminster Confession approach will do. The Christian needs more than either if he is to know—really know—that the books of the Bible come ultimately from God. He needs an authoritative Collector to affirm their inspiration. That Collector must be something other than an internal feeling. It must be an authoritative and, yes, infallible Church.

Slivers of Scripture

By Michelle Arnold

A few days ago, a friend who is the busy pastor of a parish asked if I would take a look at a question that had come in from an inquirer through his parish’s website. He hoped that I could take the time he did not have to research the answer and provide some resources for his inquirer. In a nutshell, this person wanted to know why Catholics affirm that believers could both be a part of the communion of saints and yet sin, since the apostle John said of believers:

He who commits sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. No one born of God commits sin; for God’s nature abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God (1 John 3:8–9).

I responded:

First John has to be read as a whole, and much of the letter is devoted to distinguishing between venial and mortal sin, and life in the community of Christians for people in venial or mortal sin. In chapter 1, verses 8–9, John talks about the “little” sins we all commit (i.e., venial sins). In 1 John 5:16–17, he basically defines mortal sin and states that the grace of the Christian community cannot be passed on to someone in mortal sin through personal prayer because he is cut off from the life of grace. (He must be restored first through the sacrament of confession before such graces can be of assistance to him.) It is in this context that 1 John 3:8–9 deals with life in mortal sin.

(Nota bene: I also added that if this pastor's inquirer was a Protestant he may not accept or understand this distinction between mortal and venial sin. I also recommend a couple of additional resources to be passed on to the correspondent.)

Scripture bits

Afterward, I reflected on how often misunderstandings of Scripture crop up because of lack of context. Too often readers of Scripture forget that the chapters and verses of the books of Scripture were added much later to the original text and were intended to help readers quickly find a passage of Scripture. Helpful though chapters and verses were for that purpose, they had the drawback of shaving Scripture into tiny slivers all too easily pulled from their context.

Let's look at another example of this phenomenon, one that has caused many problems between Christians and Jews. A Jewish convert to Catholicism once commented:

I was reading Michelle Arnold's response to whether or not Jews worshipped the same God of Abraham. And I know this [my answer] is the Catholic stance. However, as I was reading the Bible, I found a passage that would seemingly contradict this (John 8:38-44). Isn't Jesus saying here that the Jews who reject him are actually loyal to Satan and not [to] the God of Abraham?

This inquirer asked this question sincerely and without malice, but all too often in Christian history, anti-Semites have used this passage of John's Gospel to argue that Jews are "children of the devil." Even the horns on Michelangelo's Moses, which the artist intended to symbolize Moses' encounter with God on Mount Sinai, are sometimes interpreted by anti-Semites to be "devil horns" because of this Gospel passage.

But if we go back to Scripture itself, and look at this passage in the context of the whole of the Gospel of John, we can more readily find something much more subtle going on.

Jesus was not speaking to all Jews of all time, or to all Jews of his time, or even to those who had met him but honestly could not believe in him. He was speaking to a very specific group of Jews, ones who had once believed in him but had apparently deserted him (John 8:31), possibly after the showdown over the promise of his body and blood (cf. John 6:66). In fact, there is an interesting parallel between John 6 and John 8: In John 6, Jesus said that the disciple who stopped believing in him but did not leave was "a devil" (John 6:70); in John 8, he warns former disciples who had once believed in him but lost faith that their "father" is the devil (John 8:44).

If this language from Christ sounds harsh, keep in mind that these were not people who were never able to believe, but instead were people who once had the grace of belief and forfeited it. As Jesus said elsewhere:

Everyone to whom much is given, of him will much be required; and of him to whom men commit much they will demand the more (Luke 12:48).

If anything, this passage is as much a warning to Christians today who are wavering in their faith as it was to the Jews then who initially believed in Christ but deserted him.

Sewing Scripture together

The Church urges Christians to avoid the dangers of shaving off small sections of Scripture and divorcing those shavings from the whole. The Second Vatican Council, in its Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*), wrote:

Since Holy Scripture must be read and interpreted in the sacred spirit in which it was written, no less serious attention must be given to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture if the meaning of the sacred texts is to be correctly worked out. . . . [A]ll of what has been said about the way of interpreting Scripture is subject finally to the judgment of the Church, which carries out the divine commission and ministry of guarding and interpreting the word of God (DV 12).

What can you do in your reading of Scripture to overcome the danger of interpreting Scripture according to its fragments? Here are a few ideas:

Listen to Scripture. Most people are visually oriented. It is difficult to ignore chapter and verse breaks when you see them on a page. But when you hear Scripture read, those textual breaks become much less noticeable. The one place you can easily listen to Scripture being read on a regular basis is at Mass. But you can also get together with friends and take turns reading aloud from Scripture for the group, or you can listen to Scripture being read on audio CD. As St. Paul observed, *“So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ”* (Rom. 10:17).

If listening to Scripture read by friends, you might devise a game to test each other on where chapter breaks occur. Then you can discuss whether a particular chapter break was judicious. For example, was it wise to conclude Revelation 11 at verse 19, with the appearance of the Ark of the Covenant, or should Revelation 11:19 have been used to open Revelation 12, with the appearance of the woman clothed with the sun (cf. Rev. 12:1–2)?

Create the big picture. Rather than read the Gospels chapter by chapter, try to find the overarching story the sacred author is telling. For example, read an infancy narrative, either in Matthew or Luke, as one story, doing your best to ignore the chapter breaks. (I’ll offer an idea for how to avoid chapter breaks altogether in a moment.) This is particularly helpful exercise with the Gospel of Luke, which offers a more detailed account of the birth and childhood of Jesus. Try it with the Passion narratives in each of the Gospels, which also are spread over multiple chapters.

It can be illuminating to line up stories from the Gospels side by side to see what one evangelist includes and another omits. For example, which Gospel writer includes the flight into Egypt in his account of Christ's infancy? Which Gospel writer does not include the institution of the Eucharist in his account of the Last Supper, and what does he choose to focus on instead?

Read Bible stories. When I was a child, my family had a ten-volume set of Bible stories for children. Although I had little Christian catechesis as a child, I read all of those volumes, cover to cover, many times. Doing so gave me an overview of the Bible that has remained with me to this day. That may be one reason why I am quite good at remembering the stories of Scripture and can readily come up with a Bible story to illustrate a point. At the same time, though, I am terrible at remembering chapters and verses and am heavily dependent on this Bible search tool to find the stories I want to reference. But while I am in awe of those who can summon up verses on cue, I believe that focusing on the stories is more important.

(Nota bene: Should you decide to take this suggestion, I do not recommend tracking down the set of Bible stories I devoured as a child—either for yourself or for your children. That set was published by a Seventh-Day Adventist publishing house and thus has an Adventist editorial slant. Rather, I recommend that you look for Catholic Bible stories for your kids and at one or two of the popular life of Christ books for yourself. My favorite life of Christ is Frank Sheed's *To Know Christ Jesus*.)

Read Church documents about Scripture. The Church has a wealth of documents that can assist your understanding of the context of Scripture. There are commentaries on Scripture from Fathers, Doctors, and saints of the Church; there are magisterial documents from Church councils stretching back over two thousand years; and there are local documents prepared by national bishops' conferences. Worth mentioning in this post, in addition to *Dei Verbum*, are two that are helpful to understanding the Church's relationship with the Jewish people: *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* by the Pontifical Biblical Commission and *God's Mercy Endures Forever* by the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy of the U.S. Catholic Bishops Conference.

Visualizing the whole

Finally, when a Scripture verse is flung at you with the demand that Catholics "explain this," try to visualize the book of Scripture it comes from as a whole, and ask yourself if a similar demand would be made with any other book or document. Would you be asked to justify why the American Founding Fathers called the rule of England over the colonies "an absolute tyranny" in the Declaration of Independence? Or, if you were, could you refrain from hooting over the question, asked by someone who evidently ignored the context of the "long train of abuses" spelled out in exhaustive detail by the signatories to the Declaration?

In a similar way, passages snatched from the letters of apostles, such as those of John and Paul, cannot be interpreted absent the whole of the letter. When a non-Catholic asks you to explain a couple of verses of Scripture, the first step should be to read the whole chapter (and also the whole story, if the story stretches beyond a single chapter).

And never forget that there is good reason why our first pope in his second letter offered this wry observation:

Our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures (2 Pet. 3:15–16).

Sixteen Bible-Reading Rules Everyone Should Know (Plus One)

By Trent Horn

Rule 1: The Bible’s human authors were not divine stenographers. Everything asserted in Scripture is asserted by the Holy Spirit, but God allowed the human authors of Scripture to incorporate their own words, ideas, and worldviews into the sacred texts.

Rule 2: The Bible’s human authors were not writing scientific textbooks. Scripture does not assert a scientific description of the world, so details in the Bible that utilize “the language of appearances” are not erroneous.

Rule 3: The Bible contains many different literary styles. The Bible contains many different genres, some of which communicate true, historical facts through the use of poetic, nonliteral language.

Rule 4: Check the original language. Some Scripture passages are only difficult because they have been mistranslated. Examining the original language can help us better understand the sacred author’s intended meaning.

Rule 5: The Bible is allowed to be a sole witness to history. Ancient nonbiblical historians could make mistakes or fail to record events. Therefore, it is not necessary to require biblical events to be corroborated by nonbiblical sources.

Rule 6: Read it in context! Sometimes biblical passages only sound bad because they are isolated from their original context. Find the context and you’ll usually find the explanation of the passage.

Rule 7: Consult a reliable commentary. Commentaries provide details or facts not found in Scripture that can help explain Bible difficulties.

Rule 8: Evaluate Scripture against the whole of divine revelation. Interpret Scripture in light of what God has revealed in natural law as well as through his Church in the form of Sacred Tradition and the teaching office of the Magisterium.

Rule 9: Differing descriptions do not equal contradictions. The authors of Scripture may have differed in their descriptions of an event's details, but not in the essential truths they were asserting about those events.

Rule 10: Incomplete is not inaccurate. Just because the sacred author did not record something another author recorded does not mean his text is in error.

Rule 11: Only the original texts are inspired, not their copies. Errors that came about through the copying process do not fall under the doctrine of inerrancy and can usually be located and corrected with ease.

Rule 12: The burden of proof is on the critic, not the believer. If a critic alleges that Scripture is in error, he has the burden of proving that is the case. If the believer even shows a possible way of resolving the text, then the critic's objection that there is an intractable contradiction is refuted.

Rule 13: When the Bible talks about God, it does so in a nonliteral way. Because God is so unlike us, Scripture must speak about him with anthropomorphic language that should not be taken literally.

Rule 14: Just because the Bible records it doesn't mean God recommends it. The Bible is not an instruction book for how we should live, though sometimes it teaches us life lessons through stories that show us what not to do.

Rule 15: Just because the Bible regulates it doesn't mean God recommends it. God progressively revealed himself to mankind over several centuries. During this progression, the authors of Scripture regulated sinful practices in order to help God's people eventually reject them in the future.

Rule 16: Life is a gift from God and he has complete authority over it. It is not morally impermissible for God to take away the mortal life he freely gave us.

As our discussion draws to a close, I'd like to leave you with one last rule:

Give God's word the benefit of the doubt.

In The Beginning Was The Word

By Jimmy Akin

How the world began is a question people everywhere ask. It's a human universal.

Pagan cultures thought the world was made by their gods and goddesses. Some myths claimed that the gods reproduced sexually to make the elements of the world. Others held that there was a fierce battle among the gods, and the world was formed from the corpses of the losers. Mankind was then created as a slave race to relieve the gods of drudgery.

The book of Genesis set the record straight: The world was not produced by a multitude of finite gods. It was the creation of a single, great God—one supreme and supremely good Being who is behind everything.

Because of his infinite, unlimited power, he didn't need to use anything to make the world, as the pagans thought. He didn't need to mate with a goddess. He didn't need to battle other gods and make the world from their corpses. He simply spoke, and the elements of the world sprang into existence: *"God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light"* (Gen. 1:3).

God made a good world, and to crown his creation, he made man—not to relieve him of drudgery but to serve as his representative, ruling over creation:

God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, *"Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."* And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good (Gen. 1:27-28, 31).

Through the ages, God continued to speak. Even when man fell into sin, he sent the prophets to correct him and call him back to communion with his Creator. Eventually, he sent his Son, Jesus, to redeem mankind and to proclaim his definitive word to us:

In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world (Heb. 1:1-2).

The Gospel of John reveals more about God's Son and how the world was made:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made (John 1:1-3).

This reveals that Jesus—God’s Son—was the Word he spoke when he created the world and everything in it. When God said, “Let there be light,” it was through Jesus that this happened.

Because Jesus was there in the beginning—one of the uncreated, divine Persons of the Trinity—he is the original and supreme Word of God. All of God’s other words are shadows of him.

This is important to remember, because some today use the phrase “word of God” as if it just meant “the Bible.”

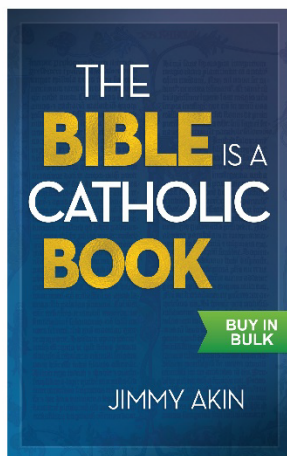
Although the Bible is important, the word of God is not confined to or only found in it. First and foremost, Jesus Christ himself is the Word of God, and there are other expressions of it, only some of which are found in Scripture.

[Click Here for **The Bible is a Catholic Book**](#)

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How God Gave Us His Word— through His Church

Many Protestants call themselves “Bible Christians”—in contrast with Catholics, who ignore the Bible because they have the Church instead.



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by Jimmy Akin
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Too many Catholics have taken this mistaken assumption for granted.

We don't have to anymore, says Jimmy Akin (*The Fathers Know Best, A Daily Defense*). Instead, we should embrace Sacred Scripture—not just as the revealed written word of God but as a thoroughly Catholic work, intimately connected with the Church from the earliest centuries.

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If you're a Catholic who sometimes gets intimidated by the Bible (especially scriptural challenges from Protestants), *The Bible is a Catholic Book* will help you better understand and take pride in this gift that God gave the world through the Church. We are the original “Bible Christians”!

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