

Because all of Scripture was produced under the action of the Holy Spirit, for the sake of our salvation, it must be acknowledged as teaching the truth “firmly, faithfully and without error.” The Church is not subscribing to fundamentalism, taking every word at face-value; but it is saying that once we take account of literary genres and figurative language, whatever Scripture does in fact affirm is without error.¹⁰⁵

Interpreting Scripture

With great wisdom, *Dei Verbum*, turns immediately from these truths to matters of interpretation. Knowing by faith that Scripture is free from error doesn't erase difficulties in the text, apparent contradictions, etc. Faith does not magically bridge the miles and centuries between us and the biblical writers. These texts, “inspired by God and committed to writing once and for all time,”¹⁰⁶ forever tie us to our ancestors in the ancient Middle East. We need to:

...carefully search out the meaning which the sacred author really had in mind, that meaning which God had thought well to manifest through the medium of their words...attention must be paid to literary forms for the fact is that truth is differently presented and expressed in the various types of historical writing, in prophetic and poetical texts,” and in other forms of literary expression. Hence the exegete must look for that meaning which the sacred writer, in a determined situation and given the circumstances of his time and culture, intended to express and did in fact express, through the medium of a contemporary literary form...due attention must be paid both to the customary and characteristic patterns of perception, speech and narrative which prevailed at the age of the sacred writer, and to conventions which the people of his time followed in their dealings with one another (*DV*, 12).¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Their Church's position is a point that is misunderstood by a number of Catholics today. For a more in-depth examination please consult Appendix VII.

¹⁰⁶ Flannery, Austin, *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, (Northport, New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1992), p.762.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*, pp.757-758.

We need to make an important distinction: we do not want to be literalist, but we do want to arrive at what has traditionally been called Scripture's *literal* sense. *Dei Verbum* speaks to us of the literal sense; it is "the meaning which the sacred authors really had in mind, that meaning which God thought well to manifest" through the literary forms and devices (and yes, even figurative language) we find in Scripture. To arrive at this meaning the Church, while recognizing its limits, endorses the use of the historical-critical method.¹⁰⁸ The historical-critical method uses scientific criteria to establish the original form of the text, sources used in its composition, its literary genre, and modifications the text likely underwent before reaching its final, fixed form.

Scripture contains a variety of literary forms (genres) and devices; and these have to be taken into account if we are to understand what the sacred writers, what God, wanted to express and teach us. Examples of these forms are: historical narrative (Ex.14:21- 22,29); historical myth (Genesis 1-11); poetry and hymns (Psalm 137:7-9); prophecy (Malachi, Amos); apocalyptic (Isaiah 13:10; Matt.24:29; Book of Revelation); pastoral instruction (Titus, 1&2 Timothy); and edifying fiction (Tobit, Judith). An example of a literary device would be anthropomorphisms, ascribing human characteristics to the Lord (Dt.11:12; Ex.13:3).

Recognizing this great variety of expression rules out fundamentalism, taking each word literally, at face-value. That is not the way we moderns express ourselves either; our daily speech is peppered with idioms and our television filled with everything from news reports and documentaries to soap operas. Knowing the form of expression is absolutely essential to knowing what its producers want us to take from it. I will watch a sitcom like CBS's *Everybody Loves Raymond* for a humorous morality tale, not for current events or political analysis. Recognizing the genre of a piece is essential to correctly interpreting its message.

The first chapter of *Genesis* serves as a classic example. The author was not writing a scientific paper; he did not intend to make any scientific assertions about the age of the earth or to make a preemptive denial of an evolu-

¹⁰⁸ It does this implicitly in *Dei Verbum* and Pope Pius XII's *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, and then explicitly in the Pontifical Biblical Commission's 1994, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*

tionary process at work in the formation of the human body.¹⁰⁹ No, instead he made use of a genre often labeled mythic narrative.¹¹⁰ Mythic symbols, already available in the surrounding culture,¹¹¹ were used to teach that Yahweh, the God of Israel, was the God of all of creation. He granted man and woman the unheard of dignity of being made in His image and likeness. Historical-critical study of Genesis has been able to show that there are actually two independent creation accounts, the first extending from 1:1 to 2:4a and the second from 2:4b-3:24. This is yet another proof for us that the inspired editor, who set the accounts next to each other, did not mean for them to be understood as blow-by-blow accounts of *how* the earth and humanity were formed; no, these stories want to communicate the “why” in language that even the simplest could understand. Among the truths we are meant to take from these accounts are: 1) the original goodness of humanity; 2) that a single couple stand at its beginning; 3) that our race enjoyed intimacy with God at its beginning; 4) Our first parents were tempted and chose their own will over God’s will; 5) thus our parents and the race descended from them entered spiritual death, and 6) God gives a first hint of redemption (Genesis 3:15).

We would think we could let our interpretive guard down a bit when we turn to the genre of historical narrative, but we would be mistaken. Recently I came across a book by Dr. Barbara Organ, *Is the Bible Fact or Fiction?: An Introduction to Biblical Historiography*. In true “contextualist” fashion she asks us to realize that ancient historians had access to, “a far narrower

¹⁰⁹ If a Christian thinks that God called forth the human body through evolution that’s fine, so long as he/she holds that once the body was fully evolved the Lord united a rational soul with it - bringing the first man and woman into existence. It wasn’t until the Lord “blew into his nostrils the *breath of life*, [that] *man* became a *living being*” (Genesis 2:7, emphasis added).

¹¹⁰ Pope John Paul II, in his general audience of Nov.7, 1979, referred to the first three chapters of Genesis as “myth,” going on to explain that “the term myth does not designate a fabulous content, but merely an archaic way of expressing a deeper content.” Most, William G. *Free From All Error*. (Libertyville, Illinois: Prow Books/Franciscan Marytown Press, 1985), p.66.

¹¹¹ The order of creation follows the same sequence as that in the *Enuma Elish*, an ancient Babylonian creation myth. Images such as a “plant of life” and a serpent can be found in the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh*. “Genesis, Reading Guide,” in *The Catholic Study Bible*, Ed. D. Senior, M.A. Getty, C. Stuhlmüller, and J.J. Collins. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp.61-62.

range of materials...and they also had a clear intent to teach a moral lesson and to entertain, to make their histories interesting...The aesthetics of history writing was an important component. The ancient historian had more freedom in rearranging material-even chronology in order to make a point.”¹¹²

Of particular interest to me was Dr. Organ’s treatment of the chronology running through *Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel*, and *1 & 2 Kings*. *1 King 6:1* states that the temple was established 480 years after Israel came out of Egypt. When one looks closely at the individual time periods recounted from the Book of Judges to that point in *1 Kings* however, a grand total of 534 years emerges.¹¹³ Organ suggests that we recognize that patterns were often inherent in ancient chronologies. The 480 years may be symbolic, forty multiplied by the twelve tribes.

The number forty appears frequently in biblical texts as a round number signifying fullness or completion...a completed cycle...The people of Israel spent forty years in the wilderness (Num.32:13)...David reigned for forty years as did Solomon (1 Kings 2:11; 11:42). Prior to the monarchy, Eli the priest is said to have “judged” Israel for forty years, and the hero Samson for twenty years. The pattern is especially noticeable in the Book of Judges, where the period of rest from the enemies are measured in forty or eighty years for a total of 200 years...David and Solomon, as Israel’s greatest kings, could not have reigned for less than a full cycle of years. Clearly these numbers are “round figures,” probably symbolic numbers to account for what must have been gaps in the historian’s narrative.¹¹⁴

This type of historical-critical insight resolves what on the surface appears to be an historical error, but in reality is only a narrative device; the ancient author was not asserting a rigid chronology but organizing and structuring his narrative. Historical texts operated by a different set of rules in antiquity than they do today. How well *Dei Verbum* captures this harmony between Scripture’s complete inerrancy and its use of ancient forms:

¹¹² Organ, Barbara E. *Is the Bible Fact or Fiction?: An Introduction to Biblical Historiography*. (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), p.7.

¹¹³Ibid, p.120

¹¹⁴Ibid, p.120