

# America Magazine, the National Catholic Weekly

## A Fundamental Challenge

*Three ways to combat biblical literalism*

BRIAN B. PINTER | SEPTEMBER 12, 2011



**L**ed a Bible study series recently at a parish in Manhattan, where most of the participants were hip, advanced-degree-holding professionals. I worked hard to prepare for the classes, and during my presentations on the first three chapters of the Book of Genesis I used the best of historical-critical exegesis by respected Catholic scholars. We explored the differences among various literary forms, examined the historical contexts in which the Genesis accounts took shape and considered the function of foundation myths in ancient Near Eastern cultures. When the participants raised questions about scientific theories concerning the origins of the universe and humankind, I made reference to the 2004 statement by the Vatican-sponsored

International Theological Commission, which spoke positively about the Big Bang theory. I also quoted Pope John Paul II's affirming remarks on the theory of evolution.

Nonetheless, a number of individuals were shocked at the suggestion that the first and second chapters of Genesis did not contain literal, historically accurate accounts of creation. One woman protested, saying, "How do you know the world wasn't made that way? You can't prove otherwise!" Another was flabbergasted that I did not affirm the historicity of the talking serpent in Genesis 3: "Are you saying that God can't create a talking snake?" Finally, an irate young man sent me e-mail to tell me, among other things, that my treatment of Genesis had no place in a Catholic parish and that I should consider becoming Protestant.

I attempted to reassure those who took exception to my nonliteralist approach by emphasizing that the ideas I taught were based not on my personal opinions but on the best of contemporary Catholic scholarship and on the tradition of the church. A few asked me, "If this is Catholic teaching, how come I've never heard it before?"

### **The Catholic Literalists**

While Catholic scholarship has moved beyond literalism in its interpretation of the Bible, many of the faithful have not. Familiarizing Catholics with the Bible and its interpretation is a continuing challenge. According to many studies, Catholics are among the most biblically illiterate Americans. While teaching Bible basics remains a major task, a more pressing and troublesome concern is the growth among Catholics of biblical literalism, also known as biblical fundamentalism. Fundamentalists assert that the Bible is without historical or

scientific error and should be read literally in all its details. According to a 2007 Gallup survey, 21 percent of U.S. Catholics identify themselves as biblical literalists. Considering that the Pontifical Biblical Commission pointed out in 1993 that “fundamentalism actually invites people to a kind of intellectual suicide,” this percentage is not insignificant.

The fundamentalist positions assumed by many Catholics today could be described as unconscious or naïve. Most Catholics who are literal readers of the Bible do not realize that this method is not a part of their faith tradition and that such interpretations have been repeatedly discouraged by Catholic scholars, pastors and bishops.

Three causes for this “unconscious fundamentalism” deserve attention: the association of religiosity with biblical literalism in American culture, a failure to explore the question: “What is the Bible?” and, finally, ignorance of the Catholic tradition’s reason-based approach to biblical interpretation.

Consider the first cause: the culture. Nearly one-third of the U.S. population holds that the Bible is the literal word of God. In the public square, one’s religiosity is often judged by how well one knows the Bible. The media are fond of pitting biblical fundamentalists who defend the “truth” of Scripture against those who see the Bible as nothing more than a collection of ancient fables and myths. One need only recall the publicity surrounding the case of *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District*, which challenged a school’s policy of teaching intelligent design in science classes, or Alabama gubernatorial candidate Bradley Byrne, who was lambasted by his opponents for suggesting that not all the

Bible was meant to be read literally. Many Catholics, fearing a secular attack on the inerrancy of Scripture, see literalism as the only way to protect the sanctity of the Bible.

Since most Catholics have very little experience reading and interpreting the Bible, they default to inadequate notions of what Scripture is. Many Americans, Catholics among them, see the Bible as a rule book, a play book or a user's manual for life. These designations lead one to believe that the Bible has all or most of the answers to life's questions. But as Prof. Dale B. Martin of Yale University, author of *Pedagogy of the Bible*, notes, if the Bible is a rule book, "it is an awfully confusing and incomplete one." As for the Bible as user's manual, says Martin, "it needed a better author and editor. And unlike really useful owner's manuals, our Bible came to us without illustrations." People of mature faith require a more nuanced approach to Scripture than these popular but simplistic definitions can provide.

A former student of mine now studying at St. Louis University had this to say about the problem of biblical literalism: "It's sad that fundamentalism still persists among some Catholics. Reading the Bible that way misses out on so much of the church's rich tradition of biblical interpretation." For Catholics, reading the Bible has always been an exercise of both head and heart.

While we Catholics believe that God is speaking to us through the words of Scripture, we recognize that we must use our powers of reason to discern the meaning of those words. Contemporary methods of Catholic biblical interpretation, for example, are informed by the findings of archaeology, historical and cultural studies of the biblical periods and the analysis of the texts in their original Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic languages.

Complementing this scientific approach are the spiritual insights into the Bible given us by the patristic writers as well as the saints and mystics. This tradition of scholarship and spirituality serves as a rich resource in our quest to unlock the meaning of Scripture. Unfortunately, many Catholics remain unaware of it.

## **What Is the Bible?**

Religious educators, Bible-study leaders and preachers can counter the three causes of fundamentalism by keeping in mind a few principles and strategies.

First, those who are responsible for teaching the Bible to children and adults must be well qualified and trained. Too often biblical literalism is promoted by inadequately prepared catechists. By second grade, for example, most children know that *The Cat in the Hat* is a different kind of book than *Who Was Abraham Lincoln?* Yet too few adults are taught that the creation accounts of Genesis are to be read differently than the Gospels, which in turn cannot be read in the same way as the Book of Revelation. Un-nuanced, uncritical reading of Scripture is what in part defines the literalist approach. While it would be unwise to try to teach contextual methods of biblical interpretation to children, they still must be given a foundation in interpreting the Bible on which they can build later, not faulty or misleading information they will have to correct later on.

Toward the goal of improving the quality of Bible instruction, some dioceses have instituted comprehensive, multi-year training programs that cover every book of the Old and New Testaments as well as methods of interpretation. This type of preparation is invaluable. Strong formation does more than head off problems. It equips those who teach the Bible to address the challenging

questions about biblical texts that both children and adults are sure to raise. Students can easily become frustrated with Bible study if teachers consistently respond to questions with the stock answer: “It’s a mystery.” Proper training can help to avoid this unsatisfying and often unnecessary bromide.

Second, Catholics must be invited to engage the question, “What is the Bible?” Professor Martin has proposed that we think of Scripture as a sacred space we enter, like a church or cathedral. The Bible functions in much the same way as a sacred building: its very presence orients us toward God; and once we enter, we find many things inside to contemplate. A church building communicates the story of the Christian experience of God, past and present, through a variety of media—stained glass, statuary, paintings and icons. Likewise Scripture invites us to contemplate God’s communication to us through such methods as historical narratives, poetry, wisdom sayings, prophecy, apocalypse and letters. As with our experience of a beautiful worship space, encountering the Bible alone will be different than when the community is gathered to hear it.

When we encounter Scripture as a sacred space, says Martin, we are “moving around in its communicative richness, allowing our imaginations, our very selves, to be changed by the experience.” This model can also accommodate the variety of interpretive methods that are a part of the Catholic tradition. Like artwork in a cathedral, the individual or community is free to interpret Scripture through historical and spiritual lenses. In this way the words of the Bible, like a piece of religious art, can say something about the original author’s intention as well as the meaning being discerned by contemporary readers.

Third, Catholic leaders and teachers must work proactively to engage the faithful with the Scripture texts of the Lectionary. The liturgical reforms derived from the Second Vatican Council have brought more of the word of God to the people; but many preachers still shy away from using the Lectionary as a biblical teaching tool. Instead, sermons are more often used for expounding on points of doctrine or addressing contemporary moral issues. As an alternative, preachers might use their exegetical skills to connect the themes of the readings of a particular day or of the liturgical season. In this way the Lectionary could be used to nourish the life of the congregation and help the faithful to see that the Bible has much to say about everyday living as a disciple of Jesus.

The Bible has an undeniable appeal—even non-Christians find it enriching and fascinating. The church can capitalize on this. We must remember, however, that there is a Catholic way of reading the Bible, and it is not literalism. Above all, our church wants people to read the Bible in a way that encourages them to “grow in grace and knowledge” while avoiding “distorted” and “destructive” interpretations (2 Pt 3:16, 18). The Catholic tradition of biblical interpretation invites us to engage Scripture critically and spiritually. This approach allows us to encounter the Bible in a manner that respects both its complexity and the challenge of applying God’s word to modern life.

*[Listen to an interview](#) with Brian B. Pinter.*

## September 12 Podcast

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## How Not to Read the Bible

Brian B. Pinter offers an intriguing account of his experiences teaching the Bible to Catholics in parishes in New York. A small but vocal minority of parishioners have taken issue with the historical/critical approach he espouses, preferring instead a literal account of Genesis and other Biblical stories. Pinter explains why some Catholics may be taken by a literal interpretation of the Bible and why a historical/critical approach actually enriches the reading experience. A campus minister at Regis High School in New York City, Pinter also offers some hopeful reflections on the faith of young people

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