

# The Depths of Scripture

THE BIBLE IN THE LIGHT  
OF THE CATECHISM



BY CANON MICHAEL LEWIS

-DEEPER CHRISTIANITY SERIES-

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# Preface

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In one of his homilies, St Augustine recalled how the Risen Christ had walked with Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus. The disciples had seen the apparent collapse of all their hopes for the salvation of Israel when Jesus had been crucified. As they walked along, Christ turned their anguish into joy by opening up the Scriptures to them, showing how the Prophets had said that the Messiah had to suffer these things in order to enter into his glory. He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things that were about himself.

Christ then appeared to the Eleven and healed their unbelief by allowing them to touch him. But, as Augustine stresses, he did not consider it sufficient simply to allow the Apostles to touch him, for

He wanted to appeal to the Scripture to confirm their hearts in the faith. He saw us in anticipation, who had not yet been born, who do not have the chance to touch Christ but do have the opportunity to read about him.<sup>1</sup>

Christ went through the whole Old Testament, spanning it all in his embrace, and showed the Eleven how his suffering had been to fulfil those Scriptures. All this was for a reason. The faith of all future generations would be built on the base of those Scriptures with which Christ wanted to confirm the faith of those who touched him. Augustine goes on to comment

The Scriptures are in fact, in any passage you care to choose, singing of Christ, provided we have ears that are capable of picking out the tune. The Lord opened the minds of the Apostles so that they understood the Scriptures. That he will open our minds too is our prayer.<sup>2</sup>

The Incarnate Word in his Paschal mystery is the meaning of Scripture. Christ is the key to the whole of Scripture and each constituent part of Scripture can only be understood in terms of the content and unity of Scripture as a whole.

This message is a central theme in the writings of Pope Benedict XVI, both as Pope and as Cardinal Ratzinger. In his *Jesus of Nazareth*, Pope Benedict has given us a master class on how to read Scripture, and calls us to return to Emmaus, to a Christ-centred *lectio divina* which is both simple and profound.

Pope St Leo the Great famously called on Christians to ‘realise their dignity.’ In our postmodern world, where everything is seen as relative, we need to realise anew the dignity of Scripture, to see it for what it is: the Word of the living God. On our part, we must be ready to be challenged by Scripture for Scripture provides the answer to the question which can shake us out of our complacency, ‘What does God ask of me?’ Reading the Scriptures can never be a passive experience. God engages with us in his word.

In reading Scripture, we are not boldly going where none has gone before. God has not left us orphans: he has sent us his Holy Spirit whose life in the Church finds expression in the great gifts of Tradition and the Magisterium, the teaching authority of the Church. The Scriptures flow from within the People of God and live within that People, the Spirit-filled community of the Church, the Bride of the Incarnate Word, whose book it is.

This book seeks to encourage people who might be hesitant, not to be afraid but to drink deep of Scripture and to realise anew its dignity in the light of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. In the Divine Liturgy of the Byzantine Rite, the Scriptures are greeted with the exultant cry ‘Wisdom!’ God speaks truly of God. With our eyes fixed on Christ, let us be attentive to God’s word and ‘taste and see that the Lord is good.’

# Scripture in the Life of Christ

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## The example of Christ

Everything that Christ did in his life on earth was for our instruction and as an example for us to follow. As the *Catechism* teaches:

In all of his life Jesus presents himself as our model. He is ‘the perfect man’, who invites us to become his disciples and follow him. In humbling himself, he has given us an example to imitate, through his prayer he draws us to pray, and by his poverty he calls us to accept freely the privation and persecutions that may come our way.

Christ enables us to live in him all that he himself lived, and he lives it in us. ‘By his Incarnation, he, the Son of God, has in a certain way united himself with each man.’ We are called only to become one with him, for he enables us as the members of his Body to share in what he lived for us in his flesh as our model. (CCC 520-521)

The *Catechism* goes on to quote St John Eudes:

We must continue to accomplish in ourselves the stages of Jesus' life and his mysteries and often to beg him to perfect and realise them in us and in his whole Church. . . For it is the plan of the Son of God to make us and the whole Church partake in his mysteries and to extend them to and continue them in us and in his whole Church. This is his plan for fulfilling his mysteries in us. (CCC 521)

Strangely enough, there is one mystery of Christ that is often overlooked: the mystery of Christ as the perfect reader of Scripture. We forget all too easily that the incarnate Word himself read and loved the Scriptures as he received them as a child, from within the faith community of the Jewish people. The way in which Christ read the Scriptures is, of course, definitive for all who would follow him.

### **The constant memory of Scripture**

Since at least the time of Ezra, the study of the Scriptures was central to Jewish faith. Great emphasis was placed on the education of children and on memorising the sacred text by repetition. When we speak of Christ reading the Scriptures, we should not picture him sitting down to read the sacred scrolls as

we sit down to read a book: few Jews could have afforded to have their own copy of the Scriptures. Christ's 'reading' was above all an interior reading of what he knew and had learned by heart. The Son of Mary treasured God's word in his Heart.

Such memorisation was not uncommon among devout Jews, just as there are devout Muslims today who know the whole of the Quran by heart. When Christ asked the scribe what he read in the Law, he was not asking him to open a book but to look into his memory. Christ would have known by heart most if not all of the Torah, and large parts of the Prophets. Christ's intimate knowledge of Scripture reflects the religious milieu in which he was immersed from childhood, a world in which the sacred text was paramount. That text was the object of an intense and ardent love. For the Son of Abraham, the Word made flesh, as for all devout Jews both then and now, there was nothing marginal or optional about the Scriptures.

As members of Christ's body, our own reading of Scripture should be an extension and continuation in our own time and space of Christ's reading of Scripture. Christ is the context in which we read the Scriptures. Our reading should be full, active and conscious: we should read as Christ read, with all of our heart, mind and soul.

Since, obviously, the Scriptures that Christ read and loved were what we now call the Old Testament, the Jewish *Tanakh*, so we too must love the Old Testament as he did. This is part of our imitation of Christ. No Christian can ignore the Old Testament if they wish to be faithful to Christ's example. Just as Christ interpreted his mission in the light of the Old Testament in which the New Testament lies hidden, so too we shall find that the Old Testament is unveiled in the New.

### **The religious education of Jesus**

Another example that Christ gives us is that of *ahavat Torah* – his love for Torah, a fervent and vibrant engagement with God's living word. Driven by the desire to study the sacred text, the Jews were the most literate of all the peoples of the Roman Empire. Both Josephus, the Jewish historian, and Seneca, the Roman writer, remark on the extraordinarily high level of Jewish religious education. By the time of the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70, the Jews had established a nationwide system of primary schools to enable Jewish boys to study the Torah, the first organised system of primary school education in recorded history. It was in this intensely Torah-loving world that Christ grew in wisdom and in favour with God and man.

St Matthew tells us that Joseph was a *zaddik*, a righteous man, a pious observer of the Law. Jewish parents saw the duty of teaching children the ‘words of God’ as strictly commanded them by God in the Shema, the ‘Hear, O Israel,’ a prayer as fundamental to Judaism as the ‘Our Father’ is to Christianity. God’s word was to be diligently taught to the young.

The Infancy narratives depict Joseph and Mary living ‘according to the Law.’ If we put the names of the members of the Holy Family back into their original form, we can see the Jewish context of Christ as the ‘reader’ of Scripture more clearly. From the beginning, Yosef and Miryam dedicated themselves to teaching the Torah to the child Yeshua. By the age of twelve, Yeshua was so advanced in his study of the Torah that he amazed the teachers in the Temple with his knowledge of the Torah in the typically rabbinic manner of answering question with question.

What the child Jesus learnt was not a set of rules and legal prescriptions but rather God’s teaching and instruction, God’s way for his people given out of infinite love for them and in which they delighted: in the words of the Psalmist: ‘O how I love thy law! It is my meditation all the day.’ Our English word ‘law’ does not express adequately the full meaning of the Hebrew word ‘Torah’ which may be better expressed as ‘teaching’ or ‘instruction.’ ‘Torah’ comes from the

Hebrew *root yarah*, to ‘shoot an arrow’ or to ‘hit the mark.’ The underlying theme is that Torah is God’s way for man, the way to be on target, God’s guide or map for his people. When Christ said that he was the way, he was essentially saying that he is our living Torah.

### **Written and oral**

Contrary to what is often said, Judaism is not a religion of the book. The Torah has two dimensions: written and oral. In one sense, ‘Torah’ refers to the five books attributed to Moses, the Pentateuch, but it also refers to all the guidance and teaching given to Israel by God’s revelation. ‘Torah’ is transmitted both in written form and in the oral tradition which both expounded and interpreted the written text. In fact, we could say that Judaism became a religion of biblical exegesis or interpretation rather than simply ‘of the book.’

A Catholic will readily see how this idea of Torah corresponds very closely to Catholic teaching on the transmission of God’s revelation both in Scripture and in Tradition. Along with his words, God gives a way of interpreting those words which is conveyed by tradition. For a Jew, the Bible was always the Bible as interpreted by Jewish tradition. The legal codes in the Torah state the law, but tradition was necessary in order to apply that law to the concrete case and to establish general principles.

From the beginning, there was a symbiotic union between text and interpretation, both of which were transmitted by tradition. In fact, even the reading of the text itself depended upon tradition. The Hebrew language contains no true vowels and is consonantal: it is the living memory of the community which permits the Hebrew text to be vocalised faithfully. Tradition is thus a total 'handing over' of what God has revealed to his People.

### **The Pharisees**

In the debates that raged between the competing schools of religious thought in his time, it is significant that Christ generally sided with the Pharisees. The Pharisees supported oral tradition against the Sadducees who rejected the whole idea of oral tradition. Certainly, Christ was highly critical of the burdensome multiplication of purely human rules, especially of the elevation of minor ritual matters over the major ethical demands of justice and charity. He criticised the motives and hypocrisy of some scribes and Pharisees; but this is not a criticism of oral tradition as such, rather of its abuse. He juxtaposed the inauthentic interpretation of the Torah with his own authentic interpretation, which draws very often on the writings of the Prophets.

In Matthew 23:2-3, Christ tells the crowds and his disciples:

The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; so practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do; for they preach, but do not practice.

The 'chair of Moses' appears nowhere in Scripture but, by speaking of it, Christ clearly acknowledges the importance and authority of oral tradition and its interpretation. Similarly, at the Last Supper, Christ respects that oral tradition: for the grace after the meal, the reciting of a blessing over the wine in Matthew's Gospel and the singing of the Hallel Psalm after the meal, which we read about in Mark, appear nowhere in the written Torah.

As the new Moses, Christ comes to give a new Torah that both fulfils and perfects the old. Just as Christ chose to be baptised by John the Baptist because it was 'fitting,' so too with his attitude to tradition: by his own example, Christ taught that Scripture does not exist in a vacuum. There is no foundation at all in the Gospels for the Protestant view of *sola scriptura*, that the Bible alone is sufficient and that Tradition can therefore be dismissed.

Throughout the Gospels, Christ uses the characteristic phrases 'Have you not read?' and 'As it is written.' His public ministry begins with his reading

from the prophet Isaiah, that is from the *Haftorah*, the selection from the prophets which followed the reading of the set Torah portion in the synagogue for Sabbath. On the cross, Christ quotes from Psalm 22: ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ Christ the reader of Scripture saw his whole life as the fulfilling of those Scriptures that he had known intimately since childhood. His inner reading of the Hebrew Scriptures was a fundamental element in his own understanding of his mission.

In our prayerful reading of Scripture, we seek to be united to Christ in the mystery of his own love and meditation on Scripture, of those holy words stored in his human mind and treasured in his Sacred Heart. Christ’s ‘reading’ and his prayer were one.

# Where do the Scriptures come from?

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## The sacred text

When Polonius asked him what he was reading, Hamlet famously gave the dismissive reply: 'Words, words, words.' Whether spoken or written, words are the units of language that convey meaning and make present the thought of the speaker or writer. At the most fundamental level, Scripture is 'words,' but what words they are! In the Incarnation, the Son of God took human language in all its weakness and limitations to himself: God became man in order that he might speak to us as he had spoken to Moses, face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.

Quoting from the Second Vatican Council's *Dei Verbum*, the *Catechism* says this on the 'words' of Scripture:

In order to reveal himself to men, in the condescension of his goodness God speaks to them in human words: 'Indeed the words of God, expressed in the words of men, are in every way like

human language, just as the Word of the eternal Father, when he took on himself the flesh of human weakness, became like men.' (CCC 101)

'Sacred Scripture is the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit.' (CCC 81)

That same Spirit who hovered over the face of the primeval deep in Genesis hovered over the sea of human words, over the chaos of letters, and through the free collaboration of human writers, transmuted those words into the very words of God. Similarly, the creation of man is mirrored in the creation of Scripture. As God shaped the dust and breathed into it and it became a living man, so the Holy Spirit breathed into human words and they became words of life.

Just as the Word took our humanity to himself from the womb of the Virgin, so God takes our words in all their fragility and weakness to himself, and makes them his own. From the time of the Fathers, a parallel has been seen between the mystery of God taking human words to himself in Scripture through the work of the Holy Spirit and his taking our human nature to himself in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary by the work of the same Spirit.

Historically, in the temporal order, it took over a millennium for the Scriptures to come into being and to reach their final form, these marvellous words inspired by the Spirit and yet also truly authored by man. But, as the speech of God, the Scriptures were God's delight from all eternity. In all his words, the Father speaks but one Word and, in that Word, his Son, he is well pleased. Hence, in the liturgy, we declare after the reading of the words of Scripture 'The word of the Lord' rather than 'the words of the Lord,' thus emphasising the unity of Scripture. *Lex orandi, lex credendi*: the law of prayer is the law of belief.

### **The Enlightenment attack on Scripture**

With the eighteenth century Enlightenment, a new school of biblical criticism emerged which the Fathers of the Church would have totally abhorred. Beginning with writers such as Reimarus, a Deist, these critics dismissed out of hand even the possibility of divine intervention in human history. Their central thesis was that the 'Christ of faith' of the Church was a fabrication of the early Church. Accordingly, the object of scholarship was to seek out the 'real' Jesus of history. The result of this allegedly dispassionate quest for the historical Jesus was almost invariably a mirror image of the scholar himself.

David Strauss's *Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (1835) purported to demonstrate that Christianity was a myth. Strauss was an important influence on the young Karl Marx and was described by Nietzsche as 'incomparable.' Ernest Renan's *Life of Jesus* (1864) essentially expressed and developed Strauss's ideas in elegant French. Although now little read, both books have had a major impact on subsequent Western religious thought.

In effect, the Rationalist attack was a revival of the Gnosticism that had threatened the early Church, in the sense of a revival not of dualism, but of the intellectual pride and spiritual elitism that lay behind that heresy. Those who were 'in the know' knew that the central tenets of traditional Christianity were merely myths. The 'real' Jesus worked no miracles, did not rise from the tomb and most certainly was not the Son of God. Faith was an opiate for the weak and credulous.

Such views helped spark a crisis in the history of Christianity, especially within the Protestant tradition, that in many ways continues to this day. We have only to look at the popularity of books such as *The Da Vinci Code*, *The Gospel According to Judas* and the numerous sensational 'debunking' accounts of the Virgin Birth or Resurrection that proliferate in the media. Undoubtedly, such attacks on orthodoxy have provided

ammunition for those hostile to Christianity, and have helped create a lingering suspicion (in the minds of those with little knowledge of Scripture) that Scripture has in some way been undermined.

In a justly famous essay called 'Fern seeds and Elephants,' C.S. Lewis wrote a devastating critique on this whole trend in Biblical criticism by homing in on its unspoken assumptions. It is an essay that should be required reading for all biblical scholars. What Lewis did was to point out the one very shaky and unconscious assumption upon which the whole case of writers such as Bultmann rested:

All theology of the liberal type involves at some point - and often involves throughout - the claim that the real behaviour and purpose and teaching of Christ came very rapidly to be misunderstood and misrepresented by his followers, and has been recovered or exhumed only by modern scholars. ... The idea that any man or writer should be opaque to those who lived in the same culture, spoke the same language, shared the same habitual imagery and unconscious assumptions, and yet be transparent to those who have none of these advantages, is in my opinion preposterous. There is an *a priori* improbability in it which almost no argument and no evidence could counterbalance.<sup>3</sup>

Far from being objective, the sceptical school of criticism swung like a weathervane driven by the wind of the prevailing philosophical fashions of the day, whether it be Deism, Hegelianism, Marxism, liberal Protestantism or the existentialism of Heidegger.

Essentially these critics saw their role as that of distilling away in the alembic of rationalism all that was supernatural, in order to arrive at a 'pure' Christianity unpolluted by the Church. The Scriptures were seen as little more than an accidental historical accumulation of disparate historical texts with a solely human authorship and of varying subjective value.

Inevitably, the liberal critics ended up with something that was a pure construct of their own imaginings, and the confirmation of their own prejudices. In the words of F.F. Bruce, their biographies of the 'real' Jesus 'often tell us more about their authors than they do about their subject.' The sceptics were expert at looking at the tiny fern seeds, but ignored the elephant in the room, namely, the extraordinary and compelling figure of Christ.

### **The way the Church reads Scripture**

The Catholic Church welcomes and embraces genuine and objective Biblical criticism as a vital tool in illuminating our understanding of the sacred text, but

for a Catholic the constant is always that the Scriptures are the inspired word of God, God's holy gift for his holy people. Indeed, one thing is utterly clear from even the most cursory reading of the Gospels. From the beginning, the historical Jesus evoked in those who met him a response of either faith or of rejection. His followers followed him because they had faith in him. No one could be neutral about Christ. Jesus was crucified not for preaching a simple gospel of universal love but because he claimed to be the Son of God. The Christ of faith and the Jesus of history are one.

The Church reads Scripture as a lover reads a love letter, delighting in every phrase and nuance, looking for the inner meaning, returning to it again and again, always seeking the face of the beloved and ever discovering new significance under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The Church knows no other way of reading God's word. In this, the Church is simply being faithful to Christ's own word and example, and that of the first Christians who read the Scriptures as words possessing a divine authority.

# How to Choose a Bible

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## Translations

**T**he gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost enabled men and women to hear the good news in their own language. Indeed, except for a handful of Aramaic phrases, Christ's words have come down to us in Greek translation. Unlike Islam, the Church has always allowed translations of the sacred text. In the West, the Latin translation of the Vulgate enjoys pre-eminence. The Orthodox Church regards the Septuagint - the Greek translation of the Old Testament - as the canonical text.

Modern translations are made from the original languages: even the classic Douay-Rheims version was translated from the Latin in the light of the Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic originals. The textual scholars who painstakingly seek to establish the most accurate text possible are the unsung heroes of biblical scholarship, and follow in a great tradition that goes back to Origen and Jerome. They work to ensure that what we receive is the pure wheat of God's word.

The ‘words of the Lord’ are not given to us that we might substitute our own words in their place, out of some misguided attempt to improve them. That would be ultimately for us to attempt to place ourselves over God’s word and to claim to know better than God himself how he should speak to us. It is the word that forms the Church, not the other way round: the Church recognises that word and interprets it, but it is always God’s word, not ours. Just as the Church cannot change the matter of the Eucharist – bread and wine – into rice and sake, so she cannot change the words of Scripture.

### **Dynamic and formal**

For most of us, our encounter with God’s word will be by means of a translation. It follows therefore that if we wish to explore the depth of Scripture, we must exercise great care in choosing a translation of the Bible so that we can be assured that what we read is an accurate and faithful version of the original. The question immediately arises ‘Which translation should I use?’ To answer that question, we need first to look at the underlying principles or philosophy of the translator.

Broadly speaking, there are two approaches to translating, both of which have their fervent supporters and opponents. The first of these approaches is known as ‘*dynamic equivalence*.’ It seeks to convey the meaning of the original text with the emphasis placed

on translating entire thoughts rather than on an exact word by word translation. To achieve a translation that reads as modern, easy to understand English, idioms, style, structure, syntax, grammar and words may well be changed considerably to promote readability and ease of understanding.

The second approach is known as '*formal equivalence*' and is the opposite of '*dynamic equivalence*.' Formal equivalence aims at achieving the maximum fidelity to the text consistent with intelligibility. This approach is 'essentially literal' as it seeks to capture the precise wording of the original and the personal style of each writer. In practice, of course, no translation falls completely into one category or the other: a totally literal translation would be unreadable, and a totally free translation would be little more than a paraphrase.

Anyone wishing to go deeper into Scripture would be ill-advised to opt for a translation that is primarily dynamically equivalent, for the simple reason that it is the words that convey meaning. As every lawyer knows, change the words and you change the meaning. To take an example from the Nicene Creed, 'seen' and 'unseen' is not the same as *visibilium et invisibilium*. If I hide behind the door, I may not be seen, but I have not become invisible like the angels. Paradoxically, language

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