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## **CHRISTIAN APPROACHES TO THE BIBLE**

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The Bible occupies a very important place in the world's literature. It is a book written by ordinary humans who lived in actual historical times. Strictly speaking the Bible is not "a book", but a whole library of books written over a span of over 1000 years by many different writers with a variety of individual styles, characteristics as well as theological purposes. St. Jerome calls it "a Divine Library."<sup>1</sup> The Bible is humanity's common heritage. Moreover, both the Jews and Christians believe that the Bible is the Word of God. They hold that it is the written record of God's progressive revelation of Himself to his chosen people and at the same time the record of their various responses to God's self-revelation. This self-revelation of God and human response to it are expressed both in words and deeds in the Bible. It is in history that God reveals himself and man responds to him.

The Bible is, however, not a heavenly book written by God and then sent to the earth, neither did he dictate the words of the Bible from heaven in some sort of divine language. God used human means to communicate his divine message. He produced the Bible within the process of the daily life of the community he had chosen. The Bible grew out of the various historical experiences of the community. The Incarnation was God's model of communication. The Bible has thus a twofold authorship: divine authorship as well as human authorship. It is the joint production of God and of

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1. Concerning the number of books contained in this library there is difference of opinion among Catholics and Protestants. For the Catholics there are 73 books in the Bible and for the Protestants 66. For the OT the Protestants accept only the 39 books of the Hebrew Bible, whereas the Catholics, in addition to these 39 books, also accept as canonical the seven Deuterocanonical books found in the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible produced in Alexandria during the 3rd century B.C. The Protestants call the Deuterocanonical Books as Apocrypha.

individual human beings. In other words, Bible is God's Word in human language. Evidence of human characteristics is obvious in stylistic features, historical outlook, cultural context and so on. When we say that the Bible is the Word of God expressed in the words of men, it means that we can find in it limitations and imperfections of human language. Whenever 'the Divine' assumes the 'human', there is always the question of limitation. Jesus is the Word become flesh. When he became "man" he had to subject himself to a particular place and time; as a man he accepted the limitations of human nature, that is, hunger, thirst, suffering etc. (cf. Heb 4:15;2:18). The Bible is the Word of God *incarnate in human words*. Since the Word of God was committed to writing by human authors we can find there limitations on the part of human authors, for example, limitations of time, place, culture, language, talents etc.

Christianity was born as a new Movement in the first-century Judaism which already possessed Scriptures which we now call the Old Testament. From the very beginning, the early Christian community claimed the Jewish Scriptures as its own. The writers of the New Testament all lived in the Jewish context and began to think and write in the categories of Judaism. For the early Christians, the primary focus of divine revelation was not Scripture, but Christ, to whom Scripture was understood to bear witness. They believed that God's purpose for Israel as revealed in the Scriptures reached its climax and fulfilment in Jesus Christ and hence sought to show how Scripture pointed to Christ.<sup>2</sup>

## **2. NEED FOR INTERPRETIVE HELPS TO UNDERSTAND THE BIBLE**

Can we understand the Bible correctly merely by reading it? There are still people who think that the Bible does not require interpretation. According to them, its message is so clear that there is no need for scholarly studies; it is enough to read the Bible and allow God to speak through its pages. But if it were so, how to explain the obscurities, inconsistencies and apparent contradictions in the Bible that make its interpretation difficult for the common

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2. PHYLLIS A. BIRD, "The Authority of the Bible", in Leander E. Keck et alii, Eds: *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994) 45.

man? Even the Bible itself testifies that "there are some things in them (i.e. in the letters of Paul) hard to understand" (2 Pet 3:16).

There are linguistic, historical, social, cultural, and philosophical gaps that block us from a spontaneous, accurate understanding of God's Word. We must understand that biblical books were written 3,000 to 1,900 years ago in ancient Near East. They were written in three ancient languages of Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek which have very different structures and idioms from our own. On the pages of the Bible we come across customs, beliefs and practices which are difficult for us to understand. Again, the Bible was written with world-views significantly different from ours. The biblical understanding of human life, of the nature of the universe is very different from our own. Therefore it is necessary to have recourse to some hermeneutical help.

### **3. DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO UNDERSTAND THE BIBLE**

In order to understand the divine message contained in the biblical writings it is necessary to bridge these gaps and enter into the world of the biblical writers. Many attempts have been made in this area from the very beginning of Christianity till today. We will try to present below some of the important approaches made in the course of the centuries, approaches that are intended to help the readers to understand the biblical message and translate it into life. We classify the different approaches into the following categories: pre-critical, uncritical, critical and contextual approaches.

#### **I. PRE-CRITICAL OR SPIRITUAL APPROACH**

The pre-critical approach is characterized by a spiritual concern for the Bible. The Fathers of the Church, especially those who lived in Alexandria, had shown special inclinations towards Spiritual interpretation of the Bible. In this trend of spiritual approaches two became prominent: one was allegorical and the other was typological.

##### **A) Allegorical Interpretation**

The most popular interpretive approach among the Fathers, like Origen and Augustine, was that of Allegorical Interpretation. A few factors led them to adopt this approach. First, they wanted to

support and give more credibility to their doctrinal teachings from the OT Scriptures. Second, they wanted to counter the attack of the Manicheans who used the literal reading of the OT to discredit the Patriarchs by pointing to the immoralities recorded in the Bible about them. Third, they found allegorical interpretation helpful to understand the OT christologically.

An allegorical exegesis of the biblical texts was of critical importance especially to Augustine. His sensitivity to the spiritual sense enabled him to render the Hebrew Scriptures as a totally Christian literature. He was, however, well aware that there was a literal or root historical meaning in each text. But his preference was always for the allegorical sense. Thus, the statement in Genesis 1:27 "male and female he created them" is allegorically understood as a reference to Christ and the Church. The Love poem, the "Song of Songs", is seen as an allegory of the relationship between God and Israel or God and the individual soul or Christ and the Church or Christ and the individual believer, depending on who is doing the interpretation.<sup>3</sup>

### **B) Typological Interpretation**

The interest in biblical "types" is very well seen in the Patristic period. But the Fathers used different words to refer to it, such as "allegory" or "mystical sense"; Thomas Aquinas understood it as the "spiritual sense". Some distinction is being made between "typology" and "allegory". Typology is based on historical persons, places and events, whereas allegory is purely imaginative.

One could define the typical sense as 'the deeper meaning of the persons, places and events written about in the Bible where they are seen to have foreshadowed future persons, places and events in God's work of salvation'.<sup>4</sup> The realities that foreshadow are types; the future realities foreshadowed are known as antitypes. Some OT types that foreshadowed Christ are: Jonah in the whale (Mt 12:40), the paschal lamb (Jn 1:29), the bronze serpent lifted up on the pole in the wilderness (Jn 3:14). The event of the

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3. Cf. John B. Gabel et alii, *The Bible as Literature. An Introduction*, 3rd Ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) 300.

4. Cf. R.E. Brown, "Hermeneutics", in R.E. Brown et alii, Eds: *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Bangalore: Theological Publications of India, 1990) 1156.

exodus is seen as a type of Christian baptism in I Cor 10:2. It is important to note that the type and the antitype are seen on two different temporal levels: the type is in the past and the antitype is in the future; only when the antitype appears does the typical sense become apparent. The element of typology is still appreciated today, but it has largely been subsumed under the role of metaphor and symbols in literary criticism.<sup>5</sup>

## II. UNCRITICAL OR FUNDAMENTALIST APPROACH

Although biblical fundamentalism had its roots in the Reformation theology with its concern for the fidelity to the literal meaning of the Scripture, and later developed in the Protestant circles as a reaction to liberal exegesis, it had also its adherents in Catholicism. The leading principles of this approach are that the Bible, being the inspired word of God, cannot and does not contain any error whatsoever and that it should be understood and interpreted "literally", i.e. in a literalist sense. No scientific or critical method of interpretation is hence admissible.<sup>6</sup>

The basic problem with this fundamentalism is that it refuses to acknowledge the historical character of biblical revelation, and for that matter, also fails to accept and appreciate the full truth of the Incarnation itself. This explains its false and ridiculous theories regarding biblical inspiration. It is thus blind to the fact that the inspired Word of God has been expressed in human language by human authors with limited capacities and resources. It tends to treat each and every word and syllable in the Bible as directly dictated by God. Further, it pays little attention to the various literary forms and human ways of thinking found in the Scripture. It often historicizes material that is symbolic or figurative, just because the narration in the biblical texts uses verbs in the past tense! Fundamentalism often overlooks or denies the problems presented by the biblical texts in their original linguistic forms; instead, it is often narrowly fixed on one translation.

5. Cf. R.E. Brown, "Hermeneutics", in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 1156-1167.

6. Cf. Pontifical Biblical Commission's Document, *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, (Bangalore: NBCLC, 1994) 69-72.

Applied to the Gospels, fundamentalism ignores the development of the gospel tradition and naively confuses the final stage of this tradition with its initial one. What the Evangelists have written is thus identified with the exact words and deeds of the Jesus of history. It also neglects the significant fact as to how the original Christian communities themselves understood the impact of Jesus and his message.

The naive and uncritical attitude of fundamentalism is manifested again in its acceptance of an antique, outdated cosmology as real, simply because it is found expressed in the Bible. This is a too narrow view of the relationship between culture and faith and can sometimes harmfully affect the reading of certain biblical texts.

Finally, with its motto "Scripture alone", fundamentalism unjustly divorces the tradition of the Church from the interpretation of the Bible and refuses to accept the Church as the authentic interpreter of the Scripture. Thus fundamentalism turns out to be a form of private interpretation. This is due to ignorance or defiance of the fact that the N.T. took form within the Church and that the Church preceded its composition.

### III. CRITICAL OR SCIENTIFIC APPROACHES

The first step in scientific interpretation of the Bible was the historical critical method that emerged in Europe in the 16th-17th centuries in the Protestant circles as the aftermath of Reformation, Renaissance and Enlightenment.<sup>7</sup> This method enjoys now recognition and acceptance in the Roman Catholic Church as well since the mid-twentieth century and has become, to a great extent, the standard method in the Christian academic circles in general. The attitude of the official Catholic Church towards such an open and critical interpretation of the Bible has undergone a long process marked by the following important milestones. In 1893 Pope Leo XIII, in his Encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*, recognised the services rendered by the scientific methods of biblical research, but with a caution that the research should not ignore the fact that the Bible

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7. Cf. R.E. Brown & Thomas Aquinas Collins, "Church Pronouncements", in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 1167-1174; Joseph Pathrapankal, "A Recent document on the Interpretation of the Bible", in *Word & Worship*, Feb. 1995, 42-46.

is the Word of God and therefore infallible. Biblical studies suffered a severe setback when in 1907 Pope Pius X, in his Encyclical *Pascendi* and the decree *Lamentabili*, censured the modernist liberal attitude in biblical exegesis. In 1920 Benedict XV, in his Encyclical *Spiritus Paraclitus*, taught that biblical inspiration extended to both religious and profane matters.

But things took a decisive turn in 1943 with the famous encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* of Pope Pius XII that is considered a landmark and the *magna carta* of modern Catholic exegesis. Among other things, the exegetes are encouraged to make proper use of textual criticism and the literary analysis of the Bible according to literary genres and form criticism. In 1964 the Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC) published the document *The Instruction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels*, which became another major breakthrough in New Testament exegesis, especially of the Gospels. It enumerates three important stages in the long process of the formation of the Gospels, namely, the stage in which Jesus lived and worked in Palestine, the stage in which the early church preserved the tradition about him, and finally the stage in which the evangelists composed the Gospels. The ideas of the document received official nature and approval in 1965 by the Second Vatican Council in its *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*.

A further step in this line is the recent document of the same Commission in 1993 on *The interpretation of the Bible in the Church*. It gives a detailed survey of different methods and approaches in biblical interpretation and some valid criteria for a Catholic exegesis. The new focus is now on developing alternative methods and approaches as complementing the historical-critical method which is no more seen as the only valid method in biblical exegesis. Starting with historical critical method we will be analyzing briefly some of the contemporary methods and approaches that are being used in the study of the Bible. The PBC's latest document is our guide in this direction.

#### **A) Historical Critical Method or Diachronic Method**

Historical critical method has become the standard method among Catholic and Protestant scholars to study the Bible today. The historical-critical method is also known as diachronic method. The

term "diachronic" literally means 'across the time.' (Greek: *dia* + *chronos*); in linguistics it means the study of a text through its historical development. In the "historical-critical method" the scholars try to understand the biblical writings by examining the historical circumstances that shaped them. It is a *historical* method, because here the scholars are particularly attentive to the historical developments of biblical texts or traditions across the passage of time and study the significance of the texts from a historical perspective. It is a *critical* method, because in each of its steps (textual criticism, source criticism, etc.) it operates with the help of scientific criteria that seek to be as objective as possible.<sup>8</sup>

The goal and task of biblical interpretation are clearly given by the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, in art. 12.1: "Since God speaks in Sacred Scripture through men in human fashion, the interpreter of Sacred Scripture, in order to *see clearly* what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully *investigate* what meaning the sacred writers really *intended*, and what God wanted to manifest *by means* of their words". (Walter M. Abbott, General Editor, *The Documents of Vatican II*, New York, Guild Press, 1966, p.120). The goal of biblical interpretation is theological: "to see clearly *what God wanted to communicate* to us" and the task is scientific: "the interpreters... should carefully *investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended* and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words". In order to achieve his task the interpreter has to use the various scientific methods and approaches for the interpretation of the Bible.

#### a) *The Literal Sense: the Task of Historical Critical Method*

We have already seen that the principal task of the interpreter is to determine the meaning of the text intended by the biblical authors and editors. The meaning directly intended and expressed by the inspired human authors through their written words is known as *the literal sense*.<sup>9</sup> Since it is the fruit of inspiration, this sense

8. Cf. The Pontifical Biblical Commission's Document on *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Bangalore: NBCLC, 1994) 37.

9. Though one could make a technical distinction between what the *author* meant and what the *text* meant, the textual meaning could be seen as a fair approximation of the author's or editor's intention.



is also intended by God, as principal author. The interpreter is to carry out a careful analysis of the text, making use of all the resources of literary and historical research, with a view to defining the literal sense of the biblical texts with the greatest possible accuracy. To this end, the study of ancient literary genres is particularly necessary.<sup>10</sup>

The literal sense is not to be confused with the "literalist" sense to which the fundamentalists are attached. It is not sufficient to translate a text word for word in order to obtain its literal sense. One must understand the text according to the literary conventions of the time in which it was written. For example, when a text is metaphorical (e.g., "Let your loins be girded", Lk 12:35, RSV), its literal sense is not that which flows immediately from a word to word translation, but that which corresponds to the metaphorical use of these terms ("Be ready for action"). When it is a question of a story, the literal sense does not necessarily imply belief that the facts recounted actually took place, for a story need not belong to the genre of history but be instead a work of imaginative fiction.<sup>11</sup> For example, the Book of Jonah, which is a post-exilic work, is not intended as a historical report but as a didactic story to teach an important lesson in universalism.<sup>12</sup> It rejects the narrow racialism of the post-exilic community, of which Jonah is a representative and it proclaims an astonishing broad-minded catholicity: God loves all men - He loves other peoples just as much as Israel itself. The central message of the book is given at Jonah 4:2 which is based on the classical text of Ex 34:6-7.

#### b) *More Than One Literal Sense*

Here one can ask the question: Does a text have only one literal sense? In general, yes; but there is no question here of a hard and fast rule, and this for two reasons. First, a human author can intend to refer at one and the same time to more than one level of meaning. This is normally the case with regard to poetry.

10. Cf. *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 37.

11. Cf. PBC's *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 78-79.

12. Gerhard Lohfink, *The Bible Now I Get It! An Entertaining Look at the Bible for people who think they know it already* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1979), 82-83.

Biblical inspiration does not reject this capacity of human psychology and language; we find numerous examples in the Fourth Gospel (e.g. 2:19; 3:3; 11:11). Secondly, even when human words appear to have only one meaning, divine inspiration can guide the expression in such a way as to create more than one meaning. This is the case with the saying of Caiaphas in Jn 11:50: at one and the same time it expresses both an immoral political ploy and a divine revelation. The two aspects belong, both of them, to the literal sense, for they are both made clear by the context. Although this example may be extreme, it remains significant, for it provides a warning against adopting too narrow a conception of the inspired text's literal sense.<sup>13</sup> The document emphasizes the "dynamic aspect" of many biblical texts and acknowledges that the literal sense is not a static one but always open to further development, which are produced through the "re-reading" of texts in new contexts. This is further confirmed by the conclusions of theories of language and of philosophical hermeneutics which affirm that written texts are open to a plurality of meaning.

From this it does not follow that we can attribute to a biblical text whatever meaning we like, interpreting it in wholly subjective way. One must reject as unauthentic every interpretation alien to the meaning expressed by the human authors in their written text. Here it is significant to recollect what Pope John Paul II has said in his address before signing the PBC's document on *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*. To arrive at a completely valid interpretation of words inspired by the Holy Spirit, one must first be guided by the Holy Spirit and it is necessary to pray for the grace to understand the language of God. Besides docility to the Holy Spirit, another attitude needed for the correct orientation of exegesis is fidelity to the faith of the Church; it is only by remaining as a member of the believing community that the Catholic exegete will be able to understand the meaning of the word of God.<sup>14</sup>

### c) *Techniques used by the Historical Critical Method*

Historical critical study of biblical writings makes use of a complex of methods in order to establish their text, understand

13. *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 79-80.

14. *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 15-16.

their context and style, and determine their origin and authenticity. Its goal is to enable the reader to know as much as possible about the meaning of the text in its original historical setting; that is, what the original author was trying to communicate to his original audience. The main branches of biblical criticism are: textual criticism, historical criticism, literary criticism, source criticism, form criticism, and redaction criticism. We give below a brief description of these methods.

#### i) Textual Criticism

Textual criticism is concerned with recovering the original text of biblical document. We no longer have access to the original manuscripts (autographs) written by the biblical authors. Their works have been handed on by copyists through centuries. With each copying, the possibility and likelihood of errors or changes entering the manuscript tradition grows. In the process of copying from one manuscript to the other it is possible that the copyist commits unintentional errors. For example, he may accidentally omit or repeat letters, words, or whole line as his eye jumped to the wrong place in the text. The aim of textual criticism is to reconstruct a text as close to the original text as possible.

#### ii) Historical Criticism

Every biblical writing may be said to have a history of its own, which includes its time and place of composition, the circumstances in which it was produced or written, its author or authors, and the audience to which it was addressed. The process through which one attempts to reconstruct the historical situation out of which a writing arose and how it came to be written is one of the main tasks of historical criticism. Through historical critical analysis, the book of Isaiah is now seen to reflect at least two historical periods, the first part (chs 1-39) stemming from an 8th century pre-exilic situation, the second part (chs 40-66) a 6th century exilic or even post-exilic situation.

#### iii) Literary Criticism

If historical criticism is concerned with the historical circumstances in which a text was written, literary criticism is concerned with the text as a finished piece of writing. The question here is: what

we can learn from what is said in the text itself. In looking at a finished piece of writing, the literary critic must often judge whether it is a unified whole or a composite work, whether certain portions were added earlier or later, and whether they all stem from the original author. For example, literary criticism brings to light the fact that the last chapter of the Fourth Gospel (Jn 21) is a later addition; so also the final twelve verses of Mark's Gospel (Mk 16: 9-20). The literary critic also attends to the words and images, the characters and their relationships, the structure and progress of thought of each biblical text and how powerfully it conveys its message to the reader. These processes are used today in studying all kinds of literature and they are not at all confined to the study of the Bible. Literary criticism helps us to read a biblical book as a literary piece and to appreciate its artistry and truth.

#### iv) Source Criticism

Source Criticism seeks to determine the sources on which a biblical writing is based, or from which it had been compiled. The sources may be either oral or written, but mainly literary (documentary) sources upon which the biblical writer might have been dependent in the composition of his work. At some points the biblical writers tell us that they used written sources. In Num 21:14-15 there is quotation from the "Book of the Wars of the Lord", and in Joshua 10:13 and 2 Sam 1:18 there are citations from the "Book of Jashar". Luke is the only the NT writer who makes an explicit claim that he had access to written sources on a large scale. In the Prologue to his Gospel, he speaks of the "many" people who "have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us" (Lk 1:1). We could presume that Luke knew these writings at first hand and made use of them in his own composition. Unfortunately he does not tell us where he relies on sources and where he composes his own. Hence the modern scholars would have to exercise their ingenuity on trying to isolate Luke's sources. Most of the contemporary scholars hold the opinion (at least as a working hypothesis) that Matthew and Luke, in writing their Gospels, have made use of two principal sources: The Gospel of Mark and a Collection of the Sayings ("Logia") of Jesus, called "Q".

## (v) Form Criticism

Form criticism is concerned with the study of literary forms in the Bible. Different writings have different forms. An essay differs in form from a poem. Each form has its own way of communicating the message. The method of form criticism was first used by the German scholars Hermann Gunkel for the OT, and Martin Dibelius and Rudolf Bultmann for the NT. It was recognized that within the Bible certain definite literary genres or forms could be identified. Gunkel analyzed the Psalms and classified them into three basic forms: the Hymns, the Laments, and the Thanksgiving Songs. The other literary forms of the OT are narratives, law codes, prophecies, wisdom sayings, proverbs, visions etc. In the NT, form criticism has concerned itself largely with investigating the individual units like narratives, miracles, parables, discourses, poetry, letters, apocalypse etc.

Once the form critic has determined the literary form of any biblical book or passage, it would help him to clarify what the author meant. If the statement about the sun standing still in Josh 10:13 comes from a poetic fragment in a victory song, he could judge it in the light of poetic license rather than according to the rules of strict history. God could inspire any type of literature that was not contrary to his holiness and truth.<sup>15</sup>

## (vi) Redaction Criticism

Redaction criticism is the most recent of all the branches of biblical criticism, emerging since the end of the Second World War. It grew out of form criticism, and it presupposes and continues the procedures of form criticism. This method is very well used in the case of the Synoptic Gospels. The word *redaction* refers to the editorial activity by which the Evangelists made use of their sources in the formation of the Gospels. If form criticism sees the Evangelists largely as collectors and transmitters of traditions, redaction criticism looks upon them as authors in their own right. Redaction criticism studies the biblical text in its final form and analyzes how the Evangelist arranged, modified and edited the traditional material that was available to him. By selecting and

15. R.E. Brown, "Hermeneutics" in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 1152.

editing the traditional material the Evangelist imposes on that material his own interpretation and theology.

For example, when one reads the three Temptation accounts as narrated in the Synoptic Gospels, he discovers that only Mark's narrative includes the detail that Jesus was "with the wild beasts" (1:13). Mark's reference to these animals may well have served to his Roman audience, who were under the threat of Neronian persecution and some of whom were literally facing wild animals in the amphitheatre, that nothing they could experience was foreign to the experience of Jesus, their Master. Another example is the Sermon on the Mount, which, in its present form, is composed by Matthew from isolated sayings of Jesus. Matthew collected the different sayings of Jesus who pronounced them on various occasions and systematically filtered these materials and rearranged them in the form of a long discourse. Most passages of Mt 5-7 are found in Luke's Gospel, where they are spread over seven chapters (Lk 6; and 11 to 16), often in contexts more probably original. This indicates that Matthew has given the present structure to the Sermon on the Mount. Moreover, he provided this discourse with a meaningful framework. In consideration of his readers and their situation, he has provided Jesus' words with new theological emphasis. Probably Matthew, writing his Gospel mainly for the Jewish Christians, wanted to present Jesus as the New Moses giving the New Law for the community of the New Israel.

The two important scholars who used this method in interpreting the NT are Willi Marxsen (for the Gospel of Mark), and Hans Conzelmann (for the Gospel of Luke).<sup>16</sup> We could also mention here Günther Bornkamm, Gerhard Barth and Hanz Joachim Held who made redactional studies on the Gospel of Matthew.<sup>17</sup> The most important contribution of the redaction-critical method is precision in interpretation. Redaction criticism's ability to sharpen the precise meaning of the author by nothing his subtle alterations

16. Willi Marxsen, *Mark the Evangelist. Studies on the Redaction History of the Gospel*, (ET, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969); Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of Saint Luke* (ET, London: Faber and Faber, 1960).

17. Gunther Bornkamm et alii, *Tradition and Interpretation Matthew* (ET, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963).

and special emphases enables us to interpret more accurately the intended meaning of the author.

*d) Limitations of the Historical Critical Method*

The historical-critical method helps to achieve an essential task of exegesis, namely, the search for the *literal sense* of Scripture which leads to a more precise understanding of the truth of the Bible. But it has its own limitation, namely, it restricts itself to a search for the meaning of texts by situating them in their original historical context and is not concerned with other possibilities of meaning which have been revealed at later stages of the biblical revelation and history of the Church. In other words, this scientific method does not pay sufficient attention to the dynamic aspect of meaning and to the possibility that meaning can continue to develop.

The historical critical method has become uni-dimensional, concerned only with the informational elements of a text, especially with the determination of the 'literal' or 'historical' meaning of the given text. But it, as a scientific method, is not fully adequate to interpret a *religious text* which aims at the personal transformation of the reader through his or her response in *faith*<sup>18</sup> and to interpret the significance of a biblical text for the modern man. Hence what is required of the catholic exegetes to-day is that they take into consideration the various hermeneutical perspectives which help towards grasping the contemporary meaning of the biblical message and which make it responsive to the needs of those who read Scripture today.<sup>19</sup> Some of the new hermeneutical perspectives we will try to explain briefly under synchronic methods and contextual approaches.

**B) Synchronic Methods**

The term "Synchronic Method" means the study of a text as it exists now. Historical critical method, on the other hand, is a "Diachronic Method". These two methods - diachronic and synchronic -

18. Cf. George Soares Prabhu, "The Historical Critical Method: Reflections on its Relevance for the Study of the Gospels in India Today", in M. Amaladoss et alii, Eds: *Theologizing in India* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1981) 318-320.

19. Cf. *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 102.

are not contrary to each other, but mutually complementary and indispensable for bringing out all the truth of the biblical text.

There are two major aims for any interpreter. The first major aim for him is to determine the answers to the following questions: What *did* the text *mean*? What did the author who produced the text intend to convey? How was the text heard and understood by its original audience? The second major aim of the interpreter is concerned with the question: What *does* the text *mean* now? How should the text be read and understood in the reader's present situation? Does it have basically the same meaning and significance? The interpreter's task is to bridge the gap between the past and present, to decide between "what it meant then" and "what it means now". The interpreter arrives at the true goal of his work only when he has explained the meaning of the biblical text as God's word for today.

The Church receives the Bible as God's Word, addressed to her and to the entire world at the present time. This conviction leads her to the work of actualizing and inculturating the biblical message. Actualization means to seek sincerely to discover what the text has to say at the present time. The various synchronic methods and contextual approaches developed in recent years are a great help in the process of actualization. Here we have to remember that actualization presupposes a correct exegesis of the biblical text, part of which is the determining of its *literal sense*. By virtue of actualization' the Bible can shed more light upon many current issues like the preferential option for the poor, liberation theology, the situation of women etc.<sup>20</sup>

As we have already mentioned above, there exists today no scientific method which is fully adequate to comprehend the biblical texts in all their richness. Though historical critical method is a basic approach to the study of the Bible, it cannot claim total sufficiency in this respect. In the last few decades scholars have proposed other methods and approaches which serve to explore more profoundly other aspects of the biblical texts, especially their contemporary relevance. Some of new methods are Structural or Semiotic Analysis, Rhetorical Analysis, Narrative Analysis,

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20. Cf. *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 113-116.



Canonical Approach, Reader-Response Approach and the Dhvani Method of Interpretation. We give below a brief description of these new methods.

#### a) Structural or Semiotic Analysis

Structural or Semiotic Analysis is a synchronic method which concentrates on the biblical text as it comes before the reader in its final state.<sup>21</sup> Unlike the historical-critical method which is interested in discovering the intention of the author of the text, structuralism focuses attention on meaning the text has in itself. This meaning is to be found, structuralists believe, in the "deep structures" of the text. "In literature 'deep structures' refer to the underlying functions, motives, and interaction among the main characters and objects in a narrative, and most notably the types of oppositions and their resolutions that develop as the text unfolds."<sup>22</sup> "Deep structures" are inherent in human cultures and language that remain constant in spite of great diversity of "surface" structures. "Surface structures" include plot, theme, motifs, characterization and so on. For the structuralists the meaning resides not in the largely irrecoverable mental process of a text's human author but in the actual words of the text itself.<sup>23</sup>

This method was first applied to the narrative texts of Scripture and has been more and more extended to other kinds of biblical discourses as well. By paying greater attention to the fact that each biblical text is a coherent whole, obedient to a precise linguistic mechanic of operation, semiotic analysis contributes to our understanding of the Bible as the Word of God expressed in human language. The great risk of this method is that of remaining at the level of a formal study of the content of texts, failing to draw out the living message. One of the advantages of this method is that it can already give the ordinary Christians, who have not undergone any specialization in biblical studies, a real taste for studying the biblical

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21. The forefather of this method is the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who worked out the theory that all language is a system of relationships obeying fixed laws. The other important scholars who contributed to the development of this method are Levi-Strauss, A.J. Greimas and Roland Barthes.
22. William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr. *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas-London: Word Publishing, 1993) 428.
23. William W. Klein et alii, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 429.

text and discovering certain of its dimensions. In the exposition of a biblical text the use of structural analysis can overcome some of the aridity experienced by those who study the text only from the point of the historical-critical methodology. Today the structuralist wants to discover how the biblical text creates a meaning effect.

## **b) Rhetorical Analysis**

Rhetorical analysis is an attempt to clarify our understanding of the biblical text through a study of its literary techniques. The Bible is a collection of literature composed in view of a persuasive goal; it seeks to secure allegiance, loyalty and faith. This method analyses duly from a rhetorical point of view in order to bring out the proper emotional response.<sup>24</sup> As an art of reading a text, rhetorical analysis pays close attention to the scope of a given passage (its beginning and end), the presence of figures of speech (for example, simile, and metaphor), the observation of compositional techniques (for example, parallelism and chiasmus), and the judgement about the relationship of form to meaning.<sup>25</sup> Further, rhetorical analysis investigates into what makes a particular use of language effective and successful in the communication of conviction. It studies style and composition as means of acting upon an audience. It can lead to the rediscovery or clarification of original perspectives that had been lost or obscured. The positive aspect of rhetorical analysis is that it draws attention to the capacity of language to persuade and convince. The Bible is not simply a statement of truths. It is a message that carries within itself a function of communication within a particular context.<sup>26</sup>

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24. Cf. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Scripture, The Soul of Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994) 45-46.

25. Cf. David Alan Black, *Using New Testament Greek in Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993) 80.

26. Cf. *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 43-44. The great scholars who applied rhetorical criticism to biblical texts are Amos Wilder, Robert Funk, Dan Via, J.D. Crossan, Wolfgang Richter and Luis Alonso-Schökel, some of whom studied the parables of Jesus as 'metaphor'. A simile illustrates, whereas metaphor reveals. A metaphor has the power to communicate an insight and evoke a new experience. Like any metaphor, a parable is open to the future, and will continue to reveal ever new meanings as it is addressed to new life situations. Each new situation will bring out a new understanding of the parable. Cf. George Soares-Prabhu, "The Historical Critical Method", 328-330.

### c) Narrative Analysis

The method of narrative analysis studies how a biblical text tells a story in such a way that it engages the reader in its "narrative world" and the systems of values and visions contained in it. Narrative analysis insists that the text also functions as a "mirror" projecting a certain image of the characters which exercises an influence upon readers in such a way as to bring them to adopt certain values rather than others. This method is well suited to the narrative character which many biblical texts display.

The narrative critic has to note how a character is developed in the story and this would help him understand whether the author wants readers to identify with that character or to avoid imitating that person. Unlike redaction critic, narrative critic does not try to determine the author's theology. Instead, he tries to ascertain the overall narrative point of view: how reality is being interpreted through the narrative world, not how the author was trying to interpret the reality.<sup>27</sup>

### d) Canonical Approach

Canonical approach aims at interpreting each biblical text in the light of the whole Bible which is accepted by the community of believers as an authoritative expression of its faith and rule of life. It seeks to situate each text within the single plan of God which is valid for all times. It is the believing community that provides a truly adequate context for interpreting biblical texts. In this context faith and Holy Spirit enrich the interpreter.<sup>28</sup>

27. Cf. Carl R. Holladay, "Contemporary Methods of Reading the Bible", in Leander E. Keck et alii Eds, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994) 143. D. Rhoads and D. Michie, in their work, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982) have applied narrative analysis to the Gospel of Mark, focusing principally on narrator, setting, plot, characters and rhetorical techniques.

28. The advocates of canonical approach are Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia, 1979) and *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Philadelphia, 1985) and James A. Sanders, *Torah and Canon: Introduction* (Philadelphia, 1972) and *Canon and Community* (Philadelphia, 1984) though they give their own interpretation to the approach.

The Old and the New Testaments do not contradict each other in their revelation of God's plan of salvation nor do the individual Books within the Bible. The Bible is its own interpreter; that is to say, one passage throws light on another, especially on obscure ones. We have to compare a biblical text, especially if it is difficult to understand, with other texts for further clarification and this is basic in Bible interpretation.<sup>29</sup> Let us take for example James 2:24 where we read, "You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone". If one were to conclude from this text that one can be saved by works alone one would have misunderstood God's Word. Conversely, if one reads from Rom 3:28 where it is written "that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law" and were to conclude from this text that faith alone saves, it would be another misinterpretation of the Bible. While James emphasises works, Paul lays stress on faith. But neither of them wanted to exclude faith from works or vice versa. In fact, both faith and works are necessary for salvation; naturally, faith that does not express itself in works is a dead faith. What we learn from this example is this: for a correct interpretation of any biblical passage it is necessary to compare it with other parallel or related passages in the Bible. We have to be cautious not to absolutize one particular passage in the Bible.

#### e) Reader-Response Approach

Reader-response analysis is a recent method in the field of critical approaches to the study of the Bible. It pays more attention to the role of the reader in the production of the meaning of a text. The contemporary philosophical hermeneutics, developed by scholars like F. Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger, and applied to the study of biblical texts through the works of Rudolf Bultmann, Hans Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, has contributed much to the reader-response-approach to the Bible. Philosophical hermeneutics emphasizes the importance of the reader in the interpretation of the text. There is a creative interaction between reader and the text. This interaction has been likened by Gadamer to a dialogue between "I" of the reader and the "thou"

29. Cf. T.N. Sterret, *How to Understand Your Bible. A Layman's Guide to Bible Interpretation* (Bombay: Joyti Pocketbooks, 1973) 27-28.

of the text, in which each is open to the other. The text responds to the reader's concerns and the reader reacts to the claims of the text and it is in this interaction of the reader with the text that the meaning emerges. And the meaning of the text can fully be grasped only as it is actualized in the life of the reader who appropriates it. The understanding of a text always entails an enhanced understanding of oneself. The main weakness of this approach is its relativism. There is always a tendency here for *eisegesis*, namely, reading *into* the text the meaning one desired to find, rather than *exegesis*, reading *out* the intended meaning.

#### f) The *Dhvani* Method of Interpretation

Analogous to the Semiotic Analysis in the West, there existed in India already from the 9th century of the Christian era a hermeneutical method known as *Dhvani* Theory proposed by Anandavardhana of Kashmir and applied first in the science of poetry (*kavyasastra*). Some of the contemporary Catholic exegetes of India are testing this Indian method in the interpretation of the Bible.<sup>30</sup>

The Sanskrit term *dhvani* literally means "an echo", "a hint" and in poetry it denotes "suggested meaning" which is different from the expressed or primary meaning. The suggested meaning, which results from the contexts or external elements, creates an atmosphere of pleasant surprise and a thrill of discovery. The suggested meaning can differ from person to person depending on each one's spiritual sensitivity and existential situation. For example, the statement, "The sun has set," may have different meanings to different people. To a lover it may mean time for a rendezvous; to a soldier, time to attack the enemy; and to a religious person, time to begin the evening prayer.<sup>31</sup>

*Dhvani* works more through evocation than through implication. It takes a reader to a depth-meaning which is experienceable but

30. Cf. Francis X. D'Sa, "Dhvani as a Method of Interpretation," in *Biblehashyam* Vol. 5, No. 4 (Dec. 1979), 276-294; A. Amaladas, *Dhvani* Theory in Sanskrit Poetics", in *Biblehashyam*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Dec. 1979), 261-275); R. J. Raja "Seeking God, Sought by God A Dhvani-Reading of the Episode of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:10)", in *Jeevadhara*, Vol. 25, No. 146 (March 1995), 139-148.

31. Cf. A. Amaladas, " 'Dhvani' Theory in Sanskrit Poetics", 264-265.

not expressible.<sup>32</sup> In the reading of any piece of literature, to a sensitive reader, there is always present an evocative hint besides and beyond what is explicitly stated there. The reader "is able to experience a depth dimension of reality, a new perception of things, persons, events etc., beyond the ordinary."<sup>33</sup> For such a reader the evoked significance of a particular passage becomes more important than its primary or literal meaning, because it is the evoked significance that may give him more aesthetic joy than the primary meaning.

For example, let us take the statement in Jn 13:30: "and it was night". Here the primary meaning is that of chronological time indicating the time after sunset. The evocative meaning refers to the spiritual realm hinting at the inner state of Judas and the coming hour of the powers of darkness. Another example is that of three magi, who, after having paid homage to the child Jesus at Bethlehem, "left for their own country by another road" (Mt 2:12). The literal meaning of this statement is that they returned home by taking a different geographical route; but in the *dhvani* reading of the text it means that they, being transformed by their encounter with the divine, have taken a different way of life.

#### IV. CONTEXTUAL APPROACHES

Some contemporary exegetes bring to their work certain points of view that are new and responsive to the present day concerns of its readers, concerns which have not till now been given sufficient consideration. Some important movements in this regard are liberation theology, feminism and inter-religious dialogue.

##### A) Liberationist Approach

Liberation theology was born in the Third-World, especially in the South America, and began to establish itself as a theological movement in the early 1970s with the pioneer works of G. Gutierrez, J. Miguez-Bonino, J. L. Segundo and J. P. Miranda. Liberation theology adopts no particular methodology. But, starting from its own socio-cultural and political point of view, it began to practise a reading

32. Cf. Francis X. D'Sa, "Dhvani as a Method of Interpretation", 277-79.

33. R.J. Raja, "Seeking God, Sought by God A Dhvani-Reading of the Episode of Zacchaeus (Lk 19:10)", in *Jeevadhara*, Vol 25, No. 146 (March 1995) 139.

of the Bible which is oriented to the needs of the people, who seek in the Scriptures nourishment for their faith and their life. Liberation theology is not content with the historical critical method which concentrates on what the text means in its original context; rather it seeks a reading of the Bible drawn from the situation of people as it is lived here and now.

Liberation theology has developed a three-part hermeneutical agenda. First, starting with the principle that experience takes precedence over theory, the liberation hermeneutic begins with the experience of injustice and poverty. Second, it attempts to analyze and assess the reasons for this exploited and impoverished existence. Third, it gives precedence to actions over rhetoric. In the liberation hermeneutic, the Bible does not normally come into play in part one but only in parts two and three.<sup>34</sup>

The main principle guiding this approach is that God, who is present in the history of his people as their Saviour, is the God of the poor and cannot tolerate oppression or injustice, and that the exegete, in imitation of God, must take sides with the poor and be engaged in the struggle to liberate the oppressed.<sup>35</sup> The Exodus account reminds us that God is concerned about the socio-political as well as spiritual freedom of his oppressed people. The impact of this approach is very well seen in the Dalit theology that is being developed in India in recent years.

## B) Feminist Approach

Feminism may be viewed as one particular branch of liberation theology, but it has developed a vast literature all its own. Though the feminist hermeneutic had its origin in the United States toward the end of the 19th century, it was in the 1970s that it had become

34. Cf. William W. Klein et alii, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 451.

35. *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 63-65. William W. Klein et alii, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, p. 451, write: "By focusing on the biblical narratives of liberation from oppression, with the exodus as the OT paradigm, and a socio-political understanding of God's kingdom as the NT paradigm, the liberationist takes heart from his or her conviction that God has a "preferential option for the poor". God sides with the oppressed against oppressors and calls believers today to do the same in working for a more humane society on this earth".

a powerful movement. There are several forms of feminist biblical hermeneutics; but all unite around a common theme, woman, and a common goal: the liberation of women and the acquisition of rights equal to those enjoyed by men.

There are three principal forms of feminist biblical hermeneutics: radical, neo-orthodox and critical. Whereas the radical form denies all authority to the Bible, maintaining that it is produced by men to confirm their domination, the neo-orthodox form accepts Bible as prophetic and as favouring women, at least to the extent that it takes sides with the oppressed, and thus with women. The critical form tries to rediscover the status and role of women disciples within the life of Jesus and in the Pauline churches where a certain equality prevailed, though in a concealed manner.

Feminist hermeneutic does not have its own methodology, it employs the current methods of exegesis, especially the historical critical method. The feminist exegesis has brought many benefits to the biblical field. Women have played a more active role in exegetical research. They have succeeded, often better than men, in detecting the presence, the significance, and the role of women in the Bible, in Christian origins and in the Church. Feminine sensitivity helped to find out and correct certain commonly accepted interpretations which sought to justify the male domination of women. Feminine studies on the OT have brought a better understanding of the image of God: He is Father, but also the God of tenderness and maternal love.<sup>36</sup>

We have to recognize the fact that both men and women may discover unique insights that emerge more clearly because of their specific gender. At the same time, both may also be "blinded" in some contexts because of their gender. We have to remember that all readers are conditioned by their culture and gender and must

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36. Cf. *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 66-68. Some of the important feminist writers who employed feminist hermeneutic in their writings are: R. Reuther, *Sexism and God-Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983); G. Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles: A Guide for the Study of Female Roles in the Bible* (Grand rapids: Baker, 1985); E.S. Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her, A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).



exercise great restraint not to impose their own subjective ideas into the ancient biblical texts to justify their position.

### **c) Inter-religious Approach**

Inter-religious approach to the Bible is in its initial stage of development and is emerging in the multi-religious context of Asia. Its basic presupposition is that the Scriptures of all the religions are inspired and revealed by God and hence are mutually complementary and enriching, and that each religion in its own way leads man deeper into the mystery of God. The goal of this approach is to seek religious harmony and promote inter-religious dialogue. R. Panikkar, Bede Griffiths, Swami Abhishiktananda, D. S. Amalorpavadass, Charles Davis, etc. have tried to apply this new approach to the Bible and have thus given the lead in this direction. This approach is in line with the positive attitude of openness to other religions officially endorsed and encouraged by the Second Vatican Council.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

The Bible is God's Word expressed and incarnated in human words. Therefore its interpretation necessarily demands the application of human sciences; like any piece of literature the Bible is also an object of critical study and interpretation. Since the biblical message is solidly grounded in history, the biblical writings cannot correctly be understood without a substantial knowledge of the historical circumstances that shaped them. The Historical critical method has been a valid and indispensable tool to this end. However, it cannot claim monopoly in the area of exegesis. The synchronic approaches have their own positive value insofar as they are capable of bringing out the dynamic aspect of meaning from the text; thus they can make a very significant contribution to biblical studies. Finally, the contextual approaches try to apply the Word of God to the contemporary human situation and thus make it relevant and actual in view of certain given challenges. However, the ever growing meaning of the Word of God can never fully be exhausted by human intellect. For, the divine wisdom and the salvific message revealed in God's Word is a mystery that surpasses all human comprehension and is an object of continual study and reflection.