The Bible in Our Lives Today

by Dianne Bergant, CSA

Has the Second Vatican Council changed our appreciation of the Bible? The very title of this article already suggests a profound change. Before the Council, the Bible played an insignificant role in the lives of most Catholics. Very few of them were acquainted with its content, with the exception of certain Bible history stories they had learned during childhood or the epic dramas produced by Hollywood. Sermons based on the Sunday readings were rare. Preaching usually developed a catechetical, doctrinal, or moralistic theme. Many people even felt that it was dangerous to read the Bible without the explicit direction of the church. Protestants may have been steeped in biblical knowledge, but Catholics certainly were not. In fact, many considered reading the Bible a Protestant devotion.

Circumstances are quite different today. Even those whose religious practice consists exclusively of Sunday or feast day liturgy have come to know quite a bit about the Bible. The liturgy itself is replete with biblical themes; often the songs sung during the liturgy are based on biblical passages, and most homilies explain some aspect of the readings of the day. The Bible certainly does play a major role in our lives today.

The Past

How did this far-reaching change come about? While it may seem that it happened almost overnight, it resulted from a rather slow and often very difficult process that can be traced back to the Council of Trent (1545-1563 C.E.). That Council decreed that no one could interpret Scripture in any way that might contradict what was taught by the Church. Centuries later, the First Vatican Council, convoked by Pius IX, issued Dei Filius (Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith; 1870). Addressing the question of revelation, the document restates the teaching of Trent that supernatural revelation is contained in both the written books of the Bible and in the unwritten Tradition handed down through apostolic teaching.

The first important papal document devoted entirely to Scripture was Leo XIII’s encyclical letter Providentissimus Dei (On the Study of Scripture; 1893). This document was a negative response to the scientific discoveries of the day concerning the age of the earth and the newly advanced theory of evolution, theories that disputed the literal understanding of the biblical accounts of creation. In 1902, Leo XIII wrote an apostolic letter entitled Vigilantiae studiique (Instituting a Commission for Biblical Studies). The establishment of this commission, which came to be known as the Pontifical Biblical Commission,
marked a significant step toward recognizing the role of biblical interpretation in the life of the broader Church. It also recognized the need to deal professionally with some of the noteworthy currents of thought in the world at large. Though the Pontifical Biblical Commission engaged in scholarly investigation, the Church was still in a defensive posture and so its statements were more defenses of Church teaching than they were exploratory. This was the age of Vatican I with its suspicion, not that of Vatican II with its openness.

Official teaching regarding the interpretation of the Bible was also promulgated by the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office, the oldest of the nine congregations that comprise the Roman Curia. Before 1904 it was known as the Supreme Congregation of the Roman and Universal Inquisition, a name that still strikes fear in the hearts of many. Today it is known as the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. In 1907, this congregation addressed the teachings advanced by the intellectual movement of the day known as Modernism. This congregation produced a decree entitled Lamentabili sane Exitu (With Truly Lamentable Results), which condemned sixty-five propositions of that intellectual movement, half of which dealt with matters of biblical interpretation spearheaded by Protestant scholars. Later that year, Pius X issued the encyclical letter Pascendi dominici gregis (On the Doctrine of the Modernists; 1907). The influence of this encyclical cannot be overestimated for, in order to ensure that traditional teaching be maintained by bishops, priests, and all teachers of theology, a compulsory anti-modernist oath of loyalty was issued. This oath remained in force until Paul VI abolished it in 1967.

A quarter century after the appearance of Providentissimus Deus, Benedict XV issued the encyclical letter Spiritus Paraclitus (Commemorating the Fifteenth Century of the Death of St. Jerome; 1920). This document was quite negative toward those who questioned the historicity of biblical narratives. It was not only adamant in its support of the Church’s teaching on biblical inerrancy (the claim that the Bible is free of error), but it also rejected the idea that the Bible should be interpreted according to its literary forms. This directive, along with the anti-modernist oath established earlier by Pius X, resulted in the suppression of much Roman Catholic participation in critical biblical interpretation of the day.

Even in the midst of this very repressive mindset, Pius XII inaugurated the modern Catholic biblical movement with the issuance of the encyclical letter Divino afflante Spiritu (On the Most Opportune Way to Promote Biblical Studies; 1943). The document marked the fiftieth anniversary of the issuance of Providentissimus Deus, the encyclical that condemned the use of innovative methods of interpretation. In this new document, Pius XII gave permission for a limited use of contemporary critical methods, including archaeology, historical studies, and literary-critical approaches. This reversal of teaching led many to hail the document as the “Magna Carta” of the Catholic biblical movement. It encourages scholars to probe the deep meaning of the Scriptures. It closes with an exhortation to bishops and priests to ground their preaching in Scripture rather than doctrinal concepts, as had been the practice at that point. This document prepared the ground for the teaching of the Second Vatican Council which would follow approximately twenty years later.

Despite the apparent openness expressed in Divino afflante Spiritu, Pius XII still struggled with the implications of the use of modern interpretive approaches. This became clear in a second encyclical letter issued by him entitled Humani generis (On Certain False Opinions Threatening to Undermine the Foundations of Catholic Doctrine; 1950). Here he nuanced the Church’s position on evolution, clearly rejecting any form of polygenism, the hypothesis that human beings descended from various ancestors rather than from one couple, Adam and Eve, as the Bible claims.

Though Pius XII’s encyclical Divino afflante Spiritu (1943) opened the door to critical biblical interpretation for Roman Catholics, such efforts of interpretation did not escape the watchful eye of the Holy Office. In 1961, just
before the opening of the Second Vatican Council, that congregation issued Warning to Those Who Expound the Scriptures. Acknowledging the strides that had been made in the study of the Bible, an affirmation of critical work in general, this statement cautioned against opinions that call into question the genuine historical and objective truth of Scripture. As negative as this caution might sound, the tenor of this statement is markedly different from that of *Lamentabili sane Exitu*. The earlier statement was a stern condemnation; this one was a warning. It appears that the Holy Office was now exercising its oversight responsibility in a very different way.

**The Present**

In the mid-1960s, a new-found interest in Bible study swept across the church. It originated in missionary work and was located within a phenomenon known as the “base Christian community.” Small groups of ordinary Christians met to discuss how the message of the Bible might make a difference in their lives. Although they often had a study leader, the members themselves were seldom trained in any form of biblical interpretation. However, this did not deter them. They studied and they prayed. Various forms of liberation theology grew out of these groups. Today similar groups can still be found in parishes around the world.

As these groups grew in strength and popularity, people gradually came to realize the importance of more critical biblical study. Graduate programs sprang up across the country and around the world. These programs were usually open to both women and men who were not pursuing ordination. At the same time, seminaries began to revise their courses of study. No longer was the Bible taught as a way of “proving” or reinforcing a particular doctrinal teaching. It was now considered a theological field in its own right and was studied from an entirely different point of view.

The Second Vatican Council spearheaded a marvelous revitalization of the Bible in the church. Both during and between sessions, many council participants attended private lectures given by prominent biblical scholars. Thus they were better prepared to consider with new seriousness the biblical foundation and challenges for their deliberations. As a further consideration of the conciliar “turn to the Bible,” the Book of the Gospels was solemnly enthroned amid the council participants at the beginning of many general sessions.

Vatican II issued a document that attested to a notable change in the Catholic Church's method of biblical interpretation. *Dei Verbum* (The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation; 1965) is considered one of the most significant documents of the council. It instructs Catholic interpreters to employ the critical methods that had engaged Protestant scholars for centuries but which had been previously banned in Catholic scholarship. These include both historical-critical and literary approaches. It encourages the critical study of both biblical testaments, acknowledging the importance of each testament in its own right. This directive abolishes any suggestion that the primary value of the Old Testament is as preparation for the New Testament. The document ends with a description of the importance of Sacred Scripture in the life of the Church. This particular concern highlights the almost complete reversal of thought that had held sway at the beginning of the twentieth century. Biblical understanding was now considered vital for the spiritual life and health of believers. Critical translations of the Bible, which included informative introductions, footnotes, and cross-references appeared in various languages. Commentaries written by Catholic and Protestants alike became the textbooks in Catholic schools, universities, and seminaries. Ecumenical biblical interpretation was born.

The Council insisted that “access to Sacred Scripture ought to be widely available to the Christian faithful” (DV 22). As a result, catechetical programs grounded in Bible study were established in parishes, liturgical preaching became biblically based, and several approved translations of the Bible appeared with contemporary study helps.
The Bible itself ceased to be only a family heirloom showcased on the coffee table, if a family even possessed a Bible, and it became a well-worn, dog-eared, frequently consulted best-seller.

Any claim that there is a chasm between the scholar in her or his “ivory tower” and the “simple faithful” has been put to rest. The popular media has demonstrated its interest in matters once considered the exclusive domain of biblical scholarship. The “Jesus Seminar,” which examined some of the historical claims of the gospel stories, caught the imagination of the American public when explanation and critique of some of its more radical points appeared in national news magazines such as Newsweek (April 4, 1994) and Time (April 8, 1996). Bill Moyers’ six-part public television series entitled “Genesis: A Living Conversation” (1986) brought Christians, Jews, and Muslims together to reflect on the influence that Genesis narratives have had on contemporary thought and life. The FRONTLINE production “From Jesus to Christ: The First Christians” (1998) included interviews of New Testament scholars and archaeologists and continues to be aired periodically. These are but a few examples that show that today, what once was considered the “simple faith” is often well grounded in critical scholarship.

Where in the past reading of the Bible often divided Catholics and Protestants, the study of the Bible enjoys considerable cooperation among the various Christian churches. Differences in understanding, with very few exceptions, are more the result of the choice of method used in interpreting the Bible than of denominational affiliation. There are Catholics and Protestants alike who choose critical methods to discover the meaning of the Bible, just as there are Catholics and Protestants alike who read the texts from a more literal point of view. This ecumenical cooperation is evident in the composition of biblical translation committees and various commentary series that are popular among both scholars and ordinary churchgoers. Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox Christians, and sometimes Jews are members of advisory and/or editorial committees and authors of volumes of the series. Clearly, biblical studies have been embraced by the believing community generally.

In a relatively recent document entitled The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church (1994), the Pontifical Biblical Commission insists that, as important as it is to know what the Bible originally meant, we must also be concerned about what it might mean today in the world within which we live, a world embroiled in economic injustice, war, and various forms of discrimination. This means that in our reading of the Bible, we must be sensitive to issues of gender, race, ethnic origin, class, and other political factors that make up the real world of real people. These factors influence the way women and men perceive reality and fashion their inner and outer worlds. Such sensitivity is particularly difficult to develop when we read stories that are clearly biased in favor of one group over another. Examples include: Israelites are always chosen over the Egyptians; men are preferred to women; and physical disabilities are often considered a form of punishment for sin. One of the pressing issues facing us today is the challenge to be faithful to the religious message of the biblical narrative while at the same time sensitive to the reality of today’s world.

We have already come a long way in this kind of sensitivity. The liberation movement that first appeared in Latin America in the early 1970s and then spread to parts of Africa, parts of Asia, and various groups within the United States has significantly affected the way we read the Bible. The experiences of oppression and poverty have brought people to a new appreciation of the biblical stories of liberation. This in turn has inspired many people to challenge present governmental structures and policies that they deem to be unjust. The women’s movement and its concern for inclusivity and mutuality on many levels have also played an important role in various translations of the Bible and in the writing of prayers that are used during the liturgy. In addition to this, feminist biblical investigation has turned the gender bias experienced by women into a tool for critiquing the gender bias within the biblical text itself. This continues to be an important issue facing the church.
The Future

What can we expect from biblical study in the future? It is always much easier to describe the past and explain the present than it is to predict the future, especially when one is suggesting how one aspect of reality will influence another. However, one can certainly point out what might be considered issues of an unfinished agenda. In this vein, three topics come to mind. These are not the only topics, nor are they necessarily the most important ones. Another biblical theologian might suggest others. These are some of the ones that interest the present writer: biblical translations; the intersection of the biblical message and contemporary concerns (integrity of creation); and interfaith respect and acceptance.

The apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini*, issued in 2010 after the conclusion of the recent synod on the Word of God, sketched an agenda for future biblical developments. It underscored the importance of biblical preaching during liturgies, the role of biblical themes and theology as part of the celebration of sacraments, and the spiritual benefits garnered from forms of prayer, such as *lectio divina* or prayerful reflection on biblical themes. It also reiterated the believers’ responsibility to preach with their lives the message of the “reign of God,” as found in both testaments of the Bible. This agenda requires continued participation of religious leaders, openness of all involved to new theological insights, and steadfastness in the face of difficulty and opposition.

The importance of the synodal document notwithstanding, several burning issues still remain to be faced by the church. One is the question of biblical language. While most people view this as a gender issue, it really carries far broader theological significance. It is probably true that sensitivity to gender-specific language spearheaded this concern, but it has been expanded to the point of uncovering other biased biblical expressions. For example, a passage from the Song of Songs has traditionally been translated: “I am black, but beautiful” (Cant 1:5). The conjunction “but” suggests an exception, implying that black is normally not beautiful, but in this case it is beautiful. The Hebrew conjunction traditionally rendered as “but” can also be translated as “and,” which yields a very different meaning. The traditional rendering “black, but beautiful” has been determined by the translator, not by the biblical text itself. Many maintain that this uncovers a racial bias. Others see it as an economic class issue because women of higher social standing were not obligated to work in the field, as women of lower class were. They were therefore not subject to the ravages of the sun as the woman in the Song was, who claims: “…the sun has burned me” (Cant 1:6). This is just an example of how critical translations and interpretations sensitive to social issues continue to be a major biblical concern.

Another aspect of biblical language is the nature of the metaphors that refer to God. The Bible characterizes God primarily as male. Changing the language of this gender characterization is a radical modification of the meaning carried by the metaphor. In the biblical world, referring to God as father implied that God was in charge as sovereign, provider, and protector. A mother, on the other hand, was subservient, with very little authority, and only valuable if she was able to produce a son. This is not meant as an argument against the use of female metaphors for God. Rather, it is a caution that a simple change of language may not be enough. Most scholars believe that the use of a range of metaphors is the best way of demonstrating that no metaphor adequately characterizes divine reality. There are many sides to this issue, and people with fervent commitment argue for each of them. Although several official statements on the matter of translations have been advanced, the struggle has not gone away, and it does not look like it will in the very near future.

Another important topic that may not yet be on the horizon of the thinking of many is the biblical understanding of the relationship between humankind and the rest of the natural world. Current threats to ecological balance have forced a new look at the biblical underpinnings of much of our attitude toward the world of which we are a
Aspects of contemporary cosmology itself have become dinner table conversation for many. However, too often the very ones engaged in such conversations retain a literal understanding of biblical narratives that reflect ancient cosmological worldviews.

The passage that is probably responsible for much of the misunderstanding of this matter is the injunction given by God in the first account of creation: “... subdue it. Have dominion...” (Gen 1:28). The injunction has led some to believe that the rest of the natural world is under the sovereign control of human beings, who can do with it as they see fit. This attitude has spawned attitudes of disregard for natural creation and its exploitation. Anyone who holds opinions like these has never placed this biblical passage, or others like it, in relationship with passages that sketch a very different point of view: “The earth is the LORD’s” (Ps 24:1).

The current concern for ecology has called for a reexamination of the biblical stories of creation, as well as other passages dealing with natural creation. This sensitivity has become a lens for critique and a focus for reinterpretation. It has shown us that many of our attitudes toward natural creation have been grounded in faulty or culturally-bound reading of the biblical accounts. The development of an authentic biblical theology of ecology is now in its infancy. However, many believe that the development of this topic will open up an exciting field of examination and spirituality.

A third area opened by Vatican II, yet still a pressing challenge, is the church’s attitude toward other faiths, especially the Jewish faith. Various passages from the New Testament, particularly from John’s Gospel and some of Paul’s writings, have been used to justify the exploitation and persecution of the Jewish people. We need not rehearse the shameful history of pogroms called and carried out by Christians, pogroms that culminated in the atrocity known as the Shoah. Antagonism against the Jewish people has often been exacerbated by some of the exclusive claims that stem from their own interpretation of the Bible. This is principally true of passages that identify the Jews, and only the Jews, as God’s chosen people and the land of Israel as rightfully theirs by divine promise.

It was the Council’s ground-breaking document Nostra Aetate (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions) that officially repudiated the accusation that the Jewish people generally, whether those in the past or those in the present, were responsible for the death of Jesus. Furthermore, it firmly condemned any form of anti-Semitism.

Since both Jewish people and Christians locate their origins and the bases of their religious worldviews in the Bible, their manner of interpreting fundamental texts has sometimes been the source of controversy. Cognizant of this, the Pontifical Biblical Commission issued a document in 2001 entitled The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible. Without compromising any principles of Catholic biblical interpretations, the document acknowledges the importance of Jewish interpretation not only for the Jewish people but for Christians as well. While this document has made remarkable strides in interfaith understanding, it has not resolved all of the differences in biblical interpretation. As is the case with the other topics mentioned above, this is an item of unfinished business.

**Conclusion**

The Second Vatican Council threw the door to biblical study wide open. Women and men, lay and ordained, have committed themselves to various forms of biblical scholarship and ministry and have been enriched and have enriched others in ways far beyond their own imagining. What does the future hold? Stay tuned!

This article was first presented as an address at Lewis University, Romeoville, IL, September 28, 2012 as part of its commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of Vatican II.