

Properties of Sacred Scripture: Part II

Last week's bulletin article started presenting principles or properties of Sacred Scripture that help to understand Scripture. It is important to bear in mind that these principles come from authoritative sources – papal encyclicals, Council documents, Fathers and Doctors of the Church, and so on. The importance of knowing these principles is (at least) two-fold: 1) it helps to understand Scripture better and gain more from it, and 2) they easily turn back the plethora of simple-minded attacks on Scripture that are so prevalent today.

Last week's article presented two of these principles:

In Scripture, God condescends to man to speak to man in terms that he can understand.

Scripture does use some figurative language, and while all Scripture has some literal meaning, the literal meaning of a passage may be the figurative literal.

As a sort of corollary to these 2 principles, it is also helpful to bear in mind the effects of original sin on man: a darkened intellect, a weakened will, and disordered passions. Thus:

God must speak “loud enough” for us to hear.

Consider Jesus' command: if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off, and so on. Some Scripture scholars, even very good ones, call this hyperbole. But we have to be careful with this. Hyperbole is the use of exaggeration to make a point. If I am describing stale bread, I might say: it's hard as a rock. It's not literally hard as rock – I am using exaggeration to make a point. But our Lord does not exaggerate. When He says: if your hand causes you to sin cut it off, He is telling us how serious sin. Thus, while He does not mean literally to cut off your hand – i.e., He *is* using (say) figurative language – He is telling us how serious sin is and He's *not* exaggerating. I think it's better, then, to call this something like: emphatic figurative language.

Another important principle to keep in mind is the purpose of Scripture:

The purpose of God revealing Himself is *our salvation*.

Note that this means that the purpose of Scripture is *not* to be a history book or a book on the physical sciences. Scripture does contain actual historical (real, tangible) events but its purpose is not meant to be a history book. A history book (at least should) contain exact dates, exact descriptions of what happened, and so on. Scripture does describe actual people and events – people and events that did actually exist and occur...Jesus, for example, was a real person who really was crucified – but its essential purpose is to reveal God, to teach us what we need to know to get to Heaven, not to be a history book. It does contain things on the natural world as well, but its purpose is not to be a book on the natural sciences. It is an error to demand that Scripture be like a history book or a book on the natural sciences; that's simply not its purpose. A popular question among young people (apparently it's making its way around the internet), for example, is: why aren't dinosaurs in the bible? I was confused by this question the first time I heard it. What possible difference does that make? It doesn't mention parents changing diapers either! I imagine, then, that this is some sort of accusation against Scripture – didn't God know about dinosaurs? The answer is simply: why *should* it say anything about dinosaurs? Its purpose is not to teach us about natural history. If it was necessary for our salvation to know about dinosaurs, then Scripture would teach about dinosaurs. Note that while for adults this might seem exceedingly simple and obvious, this is a good example of where young people (who are often fascinated by tales of dinosaurs) are taken in. As adults, once again, it is imperative to be prepared to talk to young people on these simple yet essential properties. Incidentally, we could ask equally well: why don't dinosaur books tell about God? In fact, that would actually be a more legitimate question because, while the purpose of Scripture is not to tell us about the natural world, the natural world (or sciences) does tell about God since He is its Creator.

The passage from Joshua – God made the sun stand still – also illustrates this principle. God's purpose in giving us Scripture is not to teach us about the natural world, it is to bring about our salvation. Once again, with this passage He is communicating more than just: it stayed light outside longer than the normal period of time. He is communicating, with emphasis, the power of God and His willingness to go to any lengths to do what is good for us, to bring about our salvation. Notice, though, the brilliance of this passage. Assuming that it is the

case that the sun is stationary and the earth rotates (and I'm not saying that's not the case), another thing that God is telling us here is that, in regard to our salvation – the most important thing for us – it doesn't make one iota of difference whether we know about the natural world or not. It doesn't hurt to pursue the truths of the natural world but it does not matter, it is certainly not necessary, to know these truths in order to attain to the very purpose of this life. It is a brilliant passage.

Another principle of (or reality about) Scripture that is helpful is:

All of Sacred Scripture is the inspired word of God.

And from this it immediately follows that:

All of Scripture is absolutely inerrant, in regard to the message that is intended.

The human authors of Scripture – the evangelists, for example – were real authors. That is to say, that they did use their human faculties – their mind and free will – when writing the books of the bible. At the same time, they are *secondary* authors, they are not the primary author of Scripture. God is the first or primary author of *all* of Scripture. “Inspired” means that God overshadowed or interacted with the human authors in such a way that they wrote all of what God intended and only what God intended. Since God is omniscient (all-knowing) and since He is absolute truth, it is necessarily the case that all of Sacred Scripture is absolutely inerrant in regard to the intended message.

While most Catholics, and probably even most Protestants, take this for granted, it has to be stated outright and brought to the fore of our mind when reading or trying to understand Scripture. If we encounter something like: God made the sun still, the first thing we have to say to ourselves is: well whatever this means, I know for sure that it is true...*with respect to the intended message.* Is the intention (or purpose) to teach us about the natural world? No.

Another reason it is important to state this basic reality about Scripture explicitly is because it is another thing that has been attacked over the last century or so. There are some who have tried to put forth the heretical claim (false teaching) that only parts of Scripture are inspired – and some who tried (or try) to promote this falsity call themselves Catholic. The (false) claim is that only those parts of the bible that pertain to our salvation are inspired (of course you could say: that's true, it's just that all of Scripture is intended for our salvation, but that's not the intention of this heresy. The intention is to claim that some parts of Scripture are not inspired). It is called “narrowing inspiration” and *Dei Verbum* explicitly condemned this false teaching.

Part of the importance of these two realities about Scripture is that they also give rise to these last two principles to be presented:

Scripture must be taken in its entirety.

Truth cannot contradict truth.

Consider the Gospel passage: Unless you hate your mother and father...you cannot be my disciple. This passage illustrates a number of these principles, but especially these two. We hear that and say first: now our Lord also said: Honor your father and mother (and He Himself lived by this); He commanded us not only to love but to love even our enemies; and He said: God is love. What this brings out is that to understand this command to hate mother, father (etc.), it has to be taken in conjunction with everything else our Lord said. It is almost invariably a mistake to take one passage in isolation. Now this statement about hating seems to contradict all of these other commands and indeed the very nature of God. Then I remind myself that: truth cannot contradict truth and all of Sacred Scripture is inspired. So whatever He is saying with “hate” it is true and cannot contradict all of the other commands. With the other principles presented, this is now rather easily resolved. Our Lord is using emphatic figurative language to get across the command to love God above all else. Maybe next week's article will summarize and bring out one last important aspect: the authoritative interpreter of Sacred Scripture.

God bless you, Fr Kuhn.