



# DIDN'T GOD WRITE THE BIBLE?

By Corrine L. Carvalho

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**S**OME PEOPLE WILL CLAIM THAT TO BE A “CHRISTIAN” MEANS THAT ONE MUST BELIEVE THAT EVERYTHING THE BIBLE SAYS IS TRUE. Many Christian churches, however, including the Catholic Church, would say there are many problems with this view, beginning with how we define the notion of “truth.”

Let me give you an obvious example. In Psalm 23, we read: “The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures.” Well, that can’t be literally true. First, God is not a physical shepherd; that statement is a metaphor (God is like a shepherd). And, I don’t know about you, but I’ve never been made to “lie down in green pastures,” although I do believe God leads and protects me. This is a silly example, because this is obviously a poem, full of metaphors and images, meant to be read poetically. The “truth” of Psalm 23 is not in its literal meaning, but in the truth of those metaphors. Therefore, the Catholic Church and many Protestant denominations first object to a literalist

interpretation because it does not recognize all the different kinds of texts the Bible may contain.

**BUT JEWS AND CHRISTIANS WOULD SAY THAT GOD IS AN “AUTHOR” OF THE BIBLE. HOW CAN THIS BE?**

**One of the arguments that divide Christian denominations is the way that they answer the question, who wrote the Bible?** While most Christians would say that texts in the Bible were written by both a human and a divine author, the model for how this interaction played out can differ significantly. Some Christians hold to a model of divine dictation: God told the human author what to write. Others think of God’s role more as an object for reflection than as an active agent in writing.

Each religious tradition deserves careful study to understand how its view of human-divine authorship, or inspiration, fits in with its views on creation, natural reason, and so on. Obviously, there is neither time nor space to do that here. What I can provide, however, is the model that informs my reading as a Catholic biblical scholar. In many ways, it will be compatible with many Protestant and Jewish understandings of inspiration.

**The question of how to read the Bible stems in part from the question of the authorship of the Bible.** When we use the word *author* today, we usually mean the person who actually took up pen and paper (or computer and printer) and physically, purposefully, wrote the words we read. If we restrict the word *author* in this way, then God did not write the Bible, because



God did not physically come to earth and write. But Jews and Christians would say that God is an “author” of the Bible. How can this be?

The Christian discussion of biblical authorship started early in church history when people wrote in Latin. The Latin word for *author* can mean the actual physical writer, but it can also mean something like “the authorizing agent”; in fact, it is at the root of the word *authority*. In this broader sense, the author is the person who guarantees the “authenticity” of the material.

**The Bible, then, has levels of authorship: the physical, human author and the divine author who authorizes the material.** Most churches

throughout the world believe that the Bible is the product of the interaction of divine and human authors. *Inspiration* is a term used to express that the writing of biblical texts entailed

an interaction of divine and human authors. In summary, the canon (the fixed list of sacred Scripture) is the list of those texts that were divinely inspired (had a human and divine author).

**So why do churches disagree so much about the Bible?** For instance, why do some Christian

denominations insist that the Bible’s account of creation contradicts views of evolution, while other churches find the accounts compatible? **The discord happens because churches disagree on how human and divine authors interact.**

## HUMAN AUTHORS WHO HAVE WRITTEN THE BIBLICAL TEXTS DO SO AS PRODUCTS OF GOD’S CREATION.



More to the point, not all churches agree that human authors act as independent, autonomous writers in the process of producing texts.

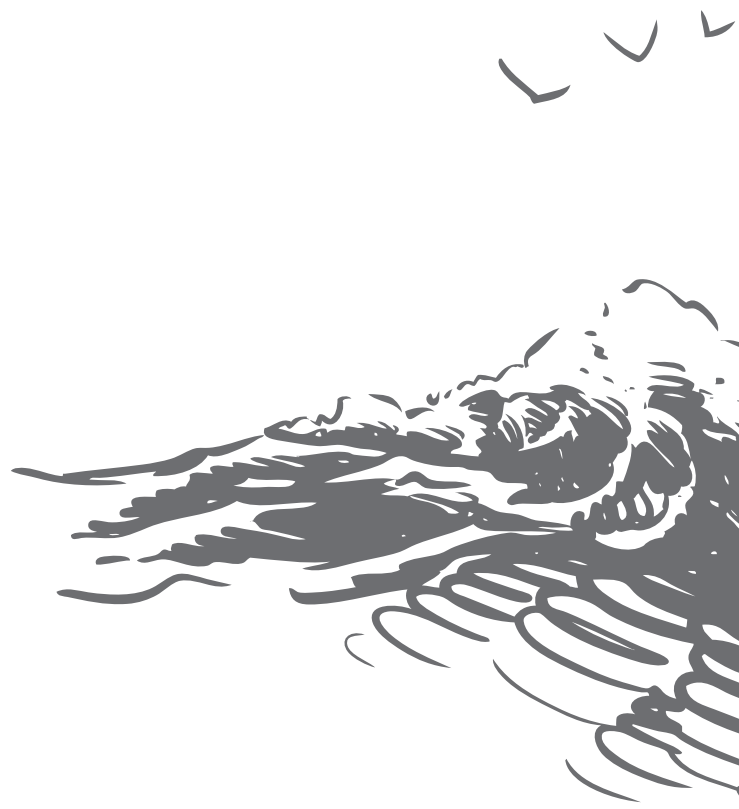
Let me give you a specific example. The Catholic Church and many Protestant denominations believe that the human authors of the biblical texts act as any human author would in producing the texts. The theological reasons for this teaching are complex but profound. To oversimplify, these Christians believe that God, who has created the world, can use that creation as a vehicle for divine revelation. Put simply, they define revelation as God's self-disclosure to humanity. Scripture is one primary way we come to know about God; that is, it is a primary source of revelation. People also come to know something about God by observing God's created world. Humans are part of that creation and, therefore, can reveal something about God through their own nature.

### **Human authors who have written the biblical texts do so as products of God's creation.**

As such, God does not have to somehow "fix up" or obliterate human nature, which was created by God, in order for Scripture to contain revelation.

Some people say that the Bible is inerrant, that is, "free from error." Fundamentalist Christians would say that everything in the Bible is inerrant; so if the Bible says that the world was created in seven days, they would interpret that to mean that it was created in seven calendar days. Catholic and much Protestant teaching is purposefully worded differently. **Catholic teaching states that the Bible is inerrant in matters of "salvation."** This means that when the Bible communicates things that people need to know to live a life that leads to salvation, they can trust that the Bible contains no error.

## **ONE WAY WE KNOW GOD'S REVELATION IS HAVE BEEN DIVINELY INSPIRED SO THAT**



For example, Catholics would contend that salvation does not depend on how long it took the world to be created, but that it does depend on knowing that God is the sole creator, that the process of creation has a purpose and design, and that what God created is good.

Let me summarize using the terms you have learned here: the word *revelation* describes God's act of imparting true knowledge about the divine nature.

## THROUGH TEXTS WRITTEN BY HUMANS WHO WHAT THEY SAY CAN LEAD US TO SALVATION.



**One way we know God’s revelation is through texts written by humans who have been divinely inspired so that what they say really can lead us to salvation.** The divinely inspired texts form the canon. Christians call this canon the Bible or Scriptures.

### HOW SHOULD WE INTERPRET SCRIPTURE?

If human authors acted as human authors when creating the text, then we must use every means

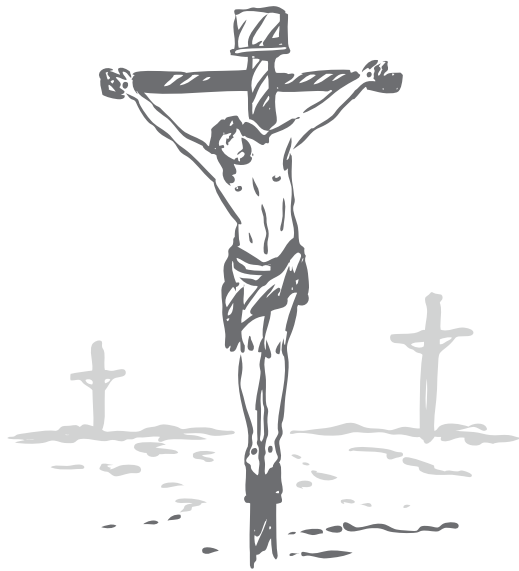
available to us to understand that text within its historical-cultural context. Many things complicate our ability to understand these texts. Modern readers have to learn many things in order to make sense of that story. But even when we think we know what is going on in a story, we may be missing things that would have been obvious to the first readers of the text.

Some of the Bible can be quite puzzling to modern ears. We may not understand the circumstances in which the texts were written or the meaning originally intended by the authors. Some of the material may seem contradictory. The actions of biblical characters may appear immoral if we do not learn about their laws. We may not recognize a metaphor if we don’t understand biblical literature. These are just some of the potential problems.

**These texts were written long ago, in a culture quite unlike ours and in a foreign language. To understand the text, we must “translate” it, not just the words but also the images and ideas.** In a literal sense, the Bible has been translated from the Hebrew and Greek into a number of English versions. But we are speaking here of a different kind of translation—translation aimed at discovering the original intent of an author in writing a given scriptural text.

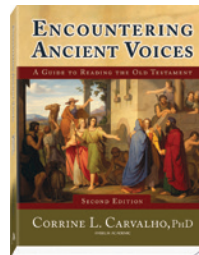
**Scripture scholars do much of that “translation” for us—not just the obvious kind, from the ancient Hebrew and Greek to modern languages, but the more challenging kind that deals with what the authors really meant.** Scholars delve into the history, archaeology, literary forms, and culture surrounding the development of the texts to help us understand their intended meanings.





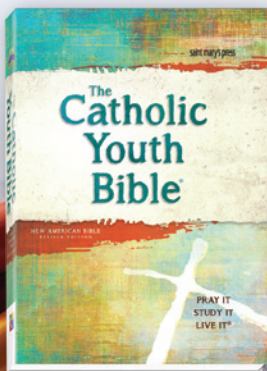
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Of course, even the best Scripture scholars disagree on certain findings and theories, and many questions are still open to debate (such as when a given scriptural text was written or who wrote it). However, by and large, biblical scholarship has shed great light on a modern understanding of the Bible. ■



*This article is an excerpt from Encountering Ancient Voices: A Guide to Reading the Old Testament, Second Edition, by Corrine L. Carvalho, PhD (2010). Winona, MN: Anselm Academic.*

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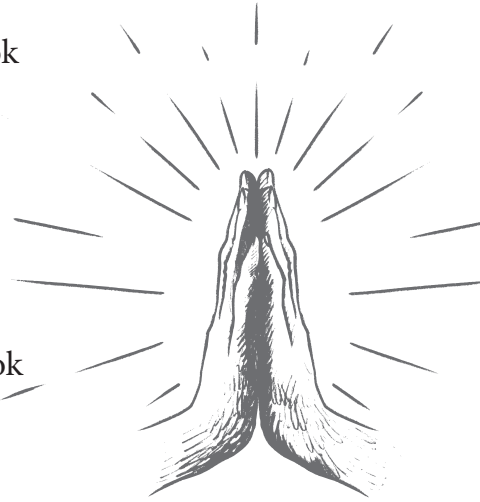




# SEVEN IMPORTANT QUESTIONS FOR INTERPRETING THE BIBLE

Here are seven summary questions you can ask  
when studying any book or story in the Bible:

- 1 • What was the historical situation at the time this book was written?  
How did the human author(s) address this situation?
- 2 • What is this book or passage's literary genre?  
What are the rules for understanding it?
- 3 • Is there a cultural practice or attitude reflected in this book  
or passage that we need to understand in order to  
appreciate the human author's intention?
- 4 • How does this book or story fit into the overall story  
of salvation history?
- 5 • How does Sacred Tradition help us to understand this book  
or story? How does this book or story help us to better  
understand God's revealed truths in Sacred Tradition?
- 6 • Is the truth I understand from this book or story consistent  
with the rest of Scripture and Tradition?
- 7 • When I look at everything I learned from these six  
questions, what spiritual truth is God revealing?



*This activity is taken from The Catholic Youth Bible® online resources.*

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