

Introduction

Once upon a time a young girl and boy were exploring the back streets of their town. Halfway down a particularly long and winding road they spotted a wrought iron gate that marked the entrance to a garden. As they peered through the bars of the gate, the children were astounded by what they saw. All sorts of beautiful flowers bloomed, their vivid hues of blue and red and yellow and green and purple made even more vibrant by the brilliant morning sun. The trails within the garden seemed to be inviting the children to come and explore as the paths disappeared into the shade of the trees growing on either side. Try as they might, however, the children could not enter the garden because the gate was firmly locked.

When they returned home that evening, they excitedly told their parents about their discovery. Their mother and father smiled, for they remembered their own enchantment with the garden when they were young. Then they sighed as they told the children that even the best locksmiths and most inventive thinkers in the town had failed to make a key to fit into the gate's lock.

The children were so sad that they could not fall asleep at bedtime. By the light of the moon, they climbed down the trellis between the windows of their bedrooms and returned to the garden. As they approached, they saw the silhouette of an elderly man coming out of the garden. They called to him. When the old man turned to face them, the children could see in the moonlight an expression of complete benevolence on his face. The man smiled and said: "Welcome, children! It is late tonight, but if you come back in the morning I will be happy to show you all of the wonders of my garden."

Just after dawn the next day the boy and girl returned to the garden. The old man was there to greet them as promised, this time accompanied by his equally kind wife. After the couple warmly embraced the children, they spent the rest of the morning taking them for a walk through the garden and delighting in the young people's joy.

As the boy and girl prepared to leave at the end of their visit, they thanked the elderly couple for sharing the beauty of the garden with them. Then they asked the man and his wife a question.

"If you like it so much when people come to visit," the children asked, "why do you make it so hard to get into the garden?"

The couple looked puzzled. "What do you mean?" they asked.

"Well," the boy and girl explained, "no one—not even the smartest men and women in our town—can figure out how to make a key that will open the lock."

"Make a key!" the man exclaimed. "Why not just use the key we leave on the hook?" And as the children looked at the stone wall to the right of the gate, they saw the key stored snugly away in a small enclosure.

Differences in approach

When you read the Bible, you may sometimes experience the same kind of frustration as those children who couldn't find a way to enter the garden. The simple purpose of this book is to help you find and use the key—four keys, actually—that will enable you to unlock the beauty and the delights within the books that make up the Bible. If you are reading this, you probably already have a basic familiarity with the unique collection of writings that are the bedrock of both Judaism and Christianity. However, you may also feel the need for a guide to interpreting these books. Approaches to biblical interpretation vary significantly across the Christian spectrum.

Some Christians insist that every word must be read in the most literal sense possible, much as one might read today's newspaper. Any attempt at interpreting the text, they believe, risks altering the divine intention of the passage. Other Christians see little difference between the stories of the Bible and the myths of other ancient

religions, myths that personify the forces of nature—stories about Thor, the Scandinavian god of thunder, for example—or assign a divine cause to natural phenomena that science today can explain using the laws of physics. In between these two extremes sit the majority of Christians whose particular faith communities recognize that the biblical texts are the product of ancient societies whose worldviews were different from ours, as well as being the tangible expressions of unique and profound experiences of God. Finding a good balance between these two realities, however, is often easier said than done.

When faced with this apparent complexity, it's easy to understand how a believer might conclude that Bible interpretation is best left to the “professionals.” Such a position is in direct conflict with the position of the Catholic Church, however: “Likewise, the sacred Synod (Vatican Council II) forcefully and specifically exhorts all the Christian faithful...to learn ‘the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ’ (Phil 3:8) by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures” (*Dei Verbum*, 25). The Scriptures, which are the foundation of the Liturgy of the Word, are meant to be devoured by each and every believer—to be read and prayed over individually and shared by small groups. The Scriptures provide the nourishment needed for a healthy faith life, just as much as the Eucharist does.

The first part of this book will present the four simple principles that will serve as your “keys” for unlocking the riches of the Bible. Parts Two and Three will get you started on the texts themselves as we use these four principles in our exploration of some critical stories in both the Old Testament (Hebrew Scriptures) and New Testament. Having launched you on a journey of discovery, the book concludes with an Epilogue that provides you with sources to help you continue on your way.

One last thought before you go. Let the Holy Spirit, your ultimate guide in exploring the riches of the Bible, lead you down the paths of the garden you are prompted to follow. Enjoy the trip.

Footnote: All of the keys, interpretations, and explanations in this book are based on the Catholic understanding of the Bible as outlined in the Vatican II document *Dei Verbum* and further devel-

oped by the Pontifical Biblical Commission. The origins of the modern approach to Scripture presented there, however, are grounded in the work of Protestant theologians of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Thus, many Christians beyond the boundaries of the Roman Catholic Church should find much of what is presented here in conformity with the teachings of their own faith communities.