

# H-Net Reviews

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**Daniel J. Harrington.** *How Do Catholics Read the Bible?* New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005. 176 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7425-4870-1; \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7425-4871-8.



How Do  
Catholics Read  
the Bible?  
— DANIEL J. HARRINGTON, SJ

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## We're Catholics: We Don't Read the Bible

This little pocket book is worth its weight in gold. I take that back; gold is not good enough. For years, I have cobbled together bits and pieces of Catholic biblical scholarship which I judged to be sufficiently comprehensive and accessible for undergraduates. This volume, both concise and informative, constitutes a significant contribution to that pedagogical effort and is a splendid gift to general readers.

After opening with a biographical anecdote whose punch line is "We're Catholics; we don't read the Bible" (p. xi), Daniel J. Harrington structures each of his chapters in the following way: a quote from *Dei Verbum*, the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on Revelation; three subtopics; and three questions for the reader. The volume concludes with twenty-five summary theses, an annotated bibliography, glossary, notes and index.

I think it apposite to this moment in Catholic biblical studies that not one of Harrington's initial quotes from *Dei Verbum* contains the free-standing words "history" or "historical"; neither do the questions he directs to the reader. Within the twenty-five summary theses, the word occurs only three times, twice as an adjective and

once modified by the word "effective." That is, Harrington and the exegetes whose work he summarizes maintain a profound respect for the historical questions, but always in a context of other dimensions of biblical truth. Indeed, following *Dei Verbum's* structure, the "why" of biblical endeavor—such as deepening one's relationship with God—and the "where" of its appropriation in a life of faith serve as bookends to the chapters about how scriptural science is exercised. Throughout this enthusiastic attempt at talking up exegesis, Harrington never dumbs it down.

Chapter 1 posits scripture as one locus of revelation and sees it as a reflection of the mystery of the Incarnation. Chapter 2 details and contrasts with other bibles the contents of the Catholic canon. Chapter 3 explores the way in which saving truth is mediated by the Spirit to church and world through the text, as well as the role of critical scholarship in that mediation. Chapter 4 is a tour through relevant literary, historical, and theological byways. Chapter 5 examines pertinent Judaica and chapter 6, the New Testament. Chapter 7 highlights the assistance afforded by philosophical hermeneutics, appreci-

ation of literal and spiritual senses, and the complementary categories of scripture and tradition. Finally, chapter 8 includes attention to the magisterium, liturgy, theological education, ecumenical endeavors and *lectio divina*. I want to ask three questions of Harrington and his readers.

Firstly, Harrington notes that the liturgical conclusion to lectionary readings, i.e., “the Word of the Lord,” subtly affirms the Bible as Word of God in human language (p. 13). That is true. And Harrington knows that, since we continue to grow in appreciation of the limited nature of these human words (e.g., texts of slavery, and John’s *ad hominem* attacks on the Jews), it is useful to remember that some of these biblical words are not yet fully the Word of the Lord in our time and place, until a responsible appropriation has occurred through the homily and beyond. Therefore, may we not hear the liturgical phrase completed in this way “The Word of the Lord (begins here)”?

Secondly, Harrington notes that the magisterium at Trent insisted on the by-then traditional connection between the sacrament of reconciliation and John 20:23: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven” (p. 116). That too is true. But the use of the whole verse by the magisterium at Trent and subsequently is relevant to Harrington’s discussion of the relationship between Sacred Writ and the magisterium. I would be very interested to hear Harrington’s assessment of the following issue. Session 14, canon 1 at Trent cites the latter half of John 20:23 as “and whose sins you shall retain [i.e., not absolve] are retained.” Subsequent sacramental studies, also hearing the second half of the verse as a reference to *sins* which are retained or not absolved, have customarily proceeded to outline the criteria and circumstances in which the priest administering the sacrament might legitimately deny absolution. But recent discussion of John 20:23b by Sandra Schneiders suggests that such a

reading is not directly relevant to the Evangelist’s intention.[1] She notes that there is no mention of sin here and that the verb *kratein* means “grasp/hold.” She suggests that the verset is best rendered “whomever you hold, are held fast,” referring to those who, their sin forgiven, are held fast, not lost, by the community. This reading is consonant with Jesus’ frequently and explicitly stated intentions elsewhere in the Gospel.[2] To those who agree with Schneider’s reading, as do I, any speculation about denying absolution today would have to be seen as an unusual means of achieving the primary Johannine objective of retaining branches on the Vine of the Beloved. Whatever one thinks about this particular reading, the larger question remains: are not magisterial judgments of fact and value free to move beyond limited Scriptural justifications employed in the past?

Finally, a question which the age of cyberspace presses upon us with increasing urgency: is the study (and by this I include memorization) of this or any other text going the way of the dinosaur? This is not a rhetorical, much less an alarmist inquiry. Rather, it reflects my experience with a slightly different but still contemporary audience of people addressed by the Word, for whom any bit of information they desire is available, they think, at the touch of a button.

In sum, both church and academy can welcome this book as a valuable *vade mecum* in biblical studies, as much for the informed access it provides to the thought of others as for Harrington’s own exegesis.

#### Notes

[1]. Sandra Schneiders, “The Resurrection of the Body (in the Fourth Gospel): A Key to Johannine Spirituality,” in *Life in Abundance: Studies of John’s Gospel in Tribute to Raymond E. Brown*, ed. John R. Donahue (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2005), 186, 187.

[2]. John 6:37, 39; 10:27-29; 17:12; 18:9.

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