

7. Languages, Text, and Context (2Q 2020—How to Interpret Scripture)

Biblical Material: Deut. 32:46, 47; 1 Kings 3:6; Num. 6:24–26; Gen. 1:26, 27; Gen. 2:15–23; 15:1–5; Deuteronomy 31:26.

Quotes

- The art of interpreting the scriptures is the only one of which all men everywhere claim to be masters... The babbling old woman, the dotting old man, and the wordy sophist, one and all take in hand the Scriptures, rend them in pieces and teach them before they have learned them. *Jerome*
- The Bible creates a vast context of meaning through cross references and allusions, phrases and metaphors, echoes and types. For readers to discover this type of biblical meaning in their translations, translators of the Bible must be constantly aware of parallel passages, expressions, and images. Where this does not happen, much of the text's actual meaning may be lost. *Raymond C. Van Leeuwen*
- Those who devote themselves to the study of Sacred Scripture should always remember that the various hermeneutical approaches have their own philosophical underpinnings, which need to be carefully evaluated before they are applied to the sacred texts. *John Paul II*
- I am persuaded that without knowledge of literature pure theology cannot at all endure, just as heretofore, when letters have declined and lain prostrate, theology, too, has wretchedly fallen and lain prostrate; nay, I see that there has never been a great revelation of the Word of God unless he has first prepared the way by the rise and prosperity of languages and letters. *Martin Luther*

Questions

Why are these factors important in our study of the Bible? Why do we need to know anything of the background or language? Does God speak differently depending on the situation? What are the dangers of taking Bible texts out of context? How can we help people not to come up with bizarre interpretations of Scripture? How can we rightly represent the God of the Bible?

Bible summary

We are to carefully follow the words of the Bible (Deut. 32:46, 47). God continues his blessings through generations (1 Kings 3:6). Num. 6:24–26 is the blessing given to the Israelites. God created and he blessed (Gen. 1:26, 27). Gen. 2:15–23 is the story of the creation of Eve, a suitable helper and a blessing to Adam. Gen. 15:1–5 is God's agreement with and blessing of Abraham. The Bible is the standard to measure our lives (Deuteronomy 31:26).

Comment

In understanding the Bible we need to remember to ask the right questions! The most obvious is to do with the basic sentences—do you understand the actual words used? The first role of language is to agree what words represent. Because if two people use one word and yet mean different things, no wonder there's misunderstanding.

The second is to ask for the meaning, not just of the words, but of the whole passage. "What is it all about?" or "What is the author getting at?" The way in which words are put together leads you to make some decision as to what the passage itself means.

The third is to ask the reason why! What is it for? Why is this being written, what is its purpose? And of course this can be the most hotly debated, for different people see different reasons and purposes.

Those are the basics. They apply to any kind of writing. But for the Christian, treating the Bible as the Word of God, there's a fundamental aspect that must be added—what does this tell me about God—and how I relate to Him. What is God trying to communicate? And why is he communicating?

Rudyard Kipling was right when he spoke about his serving men: "I keep six honest serving-men/ (They taught me all I knew);/ Their names are What and Why and When/ And How and Where and Who."

So we look at language and ask these questions. We realize that our translation is from the original Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic. That in itself poses questions, as all translations are interpretations to some degree. Then there's the changing nature of words—over centuries meaning changes. Add to that colloquial expressions and picture language. Then are we to take something literally or symbolically? There are many issues here. Then we apply the same questions to the text. Is it as close to the original as we can get? Do we have more than one version? How do we do textual analysis? What about the context of the passage we are studying? What is it all about—the whole chapter, the whole book, the whole Bible...?

For the Bible is not just an accumulation of proof texts. Nor is it a code-book. Or a system of rules. Or a treatise on achieving salvation? None of these—it's a record of the divine-human interaction, and how this is significant. Therefore we must discover through the events recorded and the prophecies and the poetry the underlying Biblical philosophy. If you simply use it to give yourself quotable quotes for life you will miss its essential meaning and purpose. What is the Bible for? is an essential question.

Then how do we use it? Sometimes we as a church have not done well in this regard. To misuse the Biblical text about "here a little and there a little" means we end up with just a collection of littles. Unless and until you have caught the concept of the wholeness of the Bible you are not fit to use it. For every "proof text" has a counterpart, and hurling dismembered pieces of the Bible at each other is no way for Christians to behave. It always reminds me of unruly children at a birthday party. Instead of sitting down to enjoy eating the feast, they start throwing it all at each other, so that all you end up with is a total mess.

Ellen White comments

In order to sustain erroneous doctrines or unchristian practices, some will seize upon passages of Scripture separated from the context, perhaps quoting half of a single verse as proving their point, when the remaining portion would show the meaning to be quite the opposite. With the cunning of the serpent they entrench themselves behind disconnected utterances construed to suit their carnal desires. Thus do many willfully pervert the word of God. Others, who have an active imagination, seize upon the figures and symbols of Holy Writ, interpret them to suit their fancy, with little regard to the testimony of Scripture as its own interpreter, and then they present their vagaries as the teachings of the Bible. {DD 7}

Some will take a text, wrest it from its true bearing, and force it into service to sustain some preconceived opinion. By linking together isolated passages of Scripture, they may deceive others. But what appears to be Bible proof for their position is no proof whatever; for the scriptures are not used in their true setting. In this way error is often magnified, and truth diminished. {RH, August 13, 1959 par. 6}