

How I read the Bible (4)

Scripture reveals God's unfolding plan

Hebrews 11:13

I have told you that I come to Scripture with at least one major presupposition and six guiding principles. The presupposition, which grows out of my reading of Exodus 3:7f and Luke 4:16ff, is that God has a bias to the poor and that the Gospel is the good news that brings release. This presupposition also comes from my own sense of calling to be a 'Repairer of Broken Walls' and a 'Restorer of Streets with Dwellings'. (Isaiah 58:12)

So far I have shared with you two of my 'hermeneutic principles'. Firstly, the Bible not only speaks today, but that it speaks clearly. A degree in theology is not necessary to grasp what God is saying through his word. Indeed, wrongly applied, such knowledge may obscure rather than illuminate. Nor do we need to follow clever plans and interpretive frameworks devised by man before we come to realise God has something to say today to me.

Secondly, all of Scripture is Christ-centred. From before the foundation of the world God had a plan of salvation and that plan was Christ, and Christ alone. Not every verse of Scripture directly refers to Jesus, but all of God's dealing with his people grows out of his plan to save and so points to Jesus. No interpretation of Scripture that leads in another direction, no matter how worthy, is permissible.

This brings us to my third principle, that Scripture is God's unfolding story. Essentially, the Bible is an historic record of God's dealings with his people over centuries. Abraham lived eighteen hundred years before Christ and the last New Testament writings date to near the end of the first century AD. That gives us nearly two thousand years of revelation, and that's not including Genesis 1-11! In the beginning Abraham knew very little about the God who had called him. He didn't even know his name. The Bible, then, is not a flat book. It grows and develops as God reveals more of himself until ultimately he declares himself in Christ.

This can have important practical implications. Abraham was a slave owning polygamist. That was the culture of his time. We now understand the world differently and reject both practices, but God does not reveal his whole intention at once and never condemns Abraham for his life-style. Indeed, not even the Mosaic Law completes the picture, as the prophets and finally Jesus point out.

Remembering that Scripture is an unfolding story guards me from another pitfall, that of treating the Bible as a theological textbook. The Bible is not a series of illustrated theological statements. We can construct a theological understanding from our reading of Scripture, but we must remember that this theology is secondary. It changes with history and geography, and rightly so. But all theology is at best tentative, a way of helping understand in the same way that botany helps us understand plants. To see a rose only as a botanical specimen misses so much. Certainly, the Bible contains theological propositions (though not as many as is sometimes assumed) but it also contains poetry, history, visions, parables and many other forms to convey spiritual truth.

It is largely under the heading of this hermeneutical principle that the techniques of Bible study fall. These include:

Respect the importance and quality of the book you're studying.

Some writing—a newspaper story, for example—might be understood by almost any mature reader. Other writing—such as a Shakespeare play—might require readers to consult dictionaries, study guides, and other aids because of the nature of the language and the subject matter. Yet other writing—a calculus textbook, for example—might require years of prior study as well as patient, focused effort in order to appreciate even a single page. The Bible contains literature at all these levels: some parts any reader can follow, some parts require some help, and some are difficult enough that even seasoned scholars struggle to comprehend them.

Respect the Bible's genres.

No serious Bible student can ignore the various genres in the Bible. Ten predominate: narrative, law, wisdom, psalms, and prophecy in the Old Testament; and gospel, parable, Acts, letter, and apocalypse in the New. Each of these genres must be read differently in order for their content to be appreciated and understood.

Respect the format.

The format of a phone book requires finding one line of text among thousands and learning from it how to contact someone. The format of a novel requires starting at the beginning and following the story to the last page. The format of the Bible requires appreciating it as an anthology of many books, each of which has its own integrity: readers of the Bible must start by recognizing the genre of a given book, and reading it systematically as a piece of literature that contributes to the overall message of the anthology. In other words, the Bible is an integrated text which benefits the reader via both the individual book and the whole. Thus, we should read the Bible book by book so as to see both the points of each individual book and the whole of Scripture.

Respect the multi-disciplinary nature of careful study.

There are several different ways to look at any piece of literature. In the case of the Bible, it pays to look from every angle that might yield a payoff. There are a number of steps in the study process. I'm not suggesting you have to follow them before you can understand Scripture, but this is how I read the Bible, particularly when preparing to preach or teach. In simplified terms:

1. Establish the unit – where does the passage start and end?
2. Study the actual text, including the original wording and issues of translation.
3. Questions of form and structure – what are the literary category and the characteristics that make any passage special, and how does the way the elements of a passage are ordered affect its meaning?
4. Background and context – this includes the passage's historical and literary setting and also its place in the wider setting of the whole Bible.
5. Secondary literature – what have others said about this passage? Note this is only done after careful study.
6. Application.

One thing not mentioned here is the vital relationship that must exist between the student of Scripture and its ultimate author. The steps I have described can be, indeed are, followed by some who have no such relationship. It is to the question of this relationship that I will turn next.

Amen.

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