

Column – Reading the Bible for all its worth

“Where did God come from?” a young woman once asked.

Before I could answer, she said, “I know.”

“Please do tell me,” I said and waited.

“He came from T-man . . . Yes, it is in the Bible!” she said excitedly.

I pulled out a concordance – this was before the days of smart phones and Google – and found the verse she was citing -- Habakkuk 3:3. In context and in the language of poetry, the prophet was saying that God appeared out of the East (Teman was a city or region east of Israel) like the rising sun and shined over his people signaling a new day.

This young woman was very sincere and had a commendable confidence in God’s Word Written, yet, I would have to say, she lacked the tools necessary to RIGHTLY divide the Word of Truth. In this way, she reminds me of another young woman

who told me she was a member of a certain church because “it was in the Bible”. She then produced a Bible and showed me the combination of words making up the name of the denomination with which she identified.

In that case, all I could say was: “That’s interesting. I see you find great comfort in your church. Keep reading your Bible and following Jesus.”

What was lacking in this young woman’s reading of the Bible (as in the case of the first) were tools of interpretation which prevent a naïve reading of a document. The technical name for these tools is hermeneutics, which refers to the science or method of making sense out of a text.

Most of you will have heard that the first rule of real estate is “location, location, location.” In hermeneutics the first rule is “context, context, context.” By context, I mean finding out when and to whom a particular passage was written and under what circumstances. Moreover, is the action reported

affirmed and commended? Judas when out and hanged himself. Should we go and do likewise?

Setting a passage in its rightful context is the first step in avoiding illegitimate and silly interpretations. Beyond context there are five other principles which will help a modern reader of scripture:

1. Pay attention to genre. ‘Genre’ refers to a type of literature. Numerous genres can be found in the Bible: history, poetry, wisdom and apocalyptic. “God came from Teman” (poetry) must be read differently from Jesus at age 12 years traveled with Mary and Joseph to Jerusalem” (history).
2. Interpret the part in light of the whole. If the surface meaning of a passage seems to be saying something that goes against other passages of scripture or is out of line with the grand narrative of the Bible, reject this reading and do more research.
3. Recognize the progressive nature of scripture. Christ is the ultimate and final Word of the Father

(Hebrews 1:1,2). Therefore, the Word Written must always conform to Him. More than that, Christ should be sought in the Old Testament scriptures. “It is they that bear witness to me,” says Jesus in John 5:39.

4. Don’t be a lone ranger. You are not the first person to read scripture. Find out what others – the Church Fathers, the Reformers and trusted contemporary commentators – have said.

5. Pray. Seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The Bible is a great treasure, ultimately pointing us to Christ the living Word. Let’s determine to read it for all its worth.

BLESSED Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen. (The Book of Common Prayer)

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