

TO UNDERSTAND THE SCRIPTURES

**A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
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How are we to understand the scriptures? This morning's gospel lessonⁱ has the post-Easter Jesus suddenly appearing to his eleven disciples and some companions of theirs gathered one evening in Jerusalem. Earlier in the day a stranger had been walking with two of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. After lots of conversation, as they were eating some supper together, suddenly they recognized the stranger as Jesus.ⁱⁱ But just as they realized who he was, he instantly vanished. Then he popped up again amidst all of the disciples in Jerusalem, saying "Peace be with you." "They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost."ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus began teaching them, explaining "That everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled. Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures."^{iv}

What does it mean to "understand the scriptures?" This passage implies first of all that the message of the scriptures is not self-evident. Secondly, it requires a process of opening of the mind. Thirdly, the Jewish scriptures are now rightly to be understood in the light of Jesus' death and resurrection.^v Luke was likely a Gentile, writing about 50 years after Jesus' death, when it had become clear that few Jews had been attracted to the gospel – the good news of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. The future of the gospel now seemed to lie with the Gentiles.^{vi} The early Christians therefore had some major problems in terms of understanding the Jewish scriptures. They needed to interpret the Jewish scriptures in relation to the death and resurrection of their master, Jesus. Most Jews, meanwhile, saw these Jesus-followers, these "Christ-ians," as discontinuous with scripture at best; more likely, they saw them as blasphemers and heretics. So, the Christians had their work cut out for them in terms of going back through all of the Jewish scriptures and showing how they pointed to Jesus as their fulfillment, defying the claim that Jesus' resurrection was an event well outside of Jewish scripture and impossible to reconcile with it. In the short run, then, this act of interpretation was what was meant by Jesus' action in "opening their minds to understand the scriptures." He was commissioning his disciples to show that he, Jesus, was the successor to Moses and all the prophets, even having been referred to by them. Jesus Christ was also the fulfillment of the Psalms, which tradition said were written by King David.^{vii} In the long run, as modern Christians opening our minds to understand the scriptures, we are now required to examine and interpret the whole Bible – the New Testament record of Jesus as well as the so-called "Old Testament" record of the Jewish people's relationship to God. And how are we to do that in the twenty-first century at Stanford University?

There's a basic conflict in the U.S. today between two ways of reading the Bible: literally and through historical analysis (as I just did). The former is utilized by Christian fundamentalists and the latter has been taught in the seminaries of mainline Christian denominations for the last century.^{viii} The literal approach has, unfortunately, made the

Bible implausible and ultimately irrelevant for vast numbers of people.^{ix} Peter Gomes, long the university chaplain at Harvard, wrote a *New York Times* best-seller ten years ago entitled *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart*. He tells the story of a fundamentalist preacher describing a place in the outer darkness referred to in Matthew 8:12 where the wicked will be thrown, “weeping and gnashing their teeth.” An old, toothless parishioner asks what will happen to those who have no teeth to gnash. The preacher immediately replies: “Teeth will be provided.”^x Gomes also cites a story by former Stanford professor and interim dean of this chapel, Robert McAfee Brown, referring to those whose method of understanding scripture is simply to open it up and let one’s finger fall upon a passage to read, supposedly guided by the Holy Spirit. A devout practitioner of this method found his finger pointing to Matthew 27:5: “And Judas went out and hanged himself.” Trying again, his finger happened upon Luke 10:37: “Go and do likewise.”^{xi}

I’ve never met a pure Biblical fundamentalist at Stanford, even among the fifteen or so Protestant evangelical groups on campus. Today the historical method of interpretation is taken for granted by most evangelical scholars, even if they claim that scripture is inerrant or infallible. The historical method has long been taken for granted by Catholic scholars as well. This approach began in the nineteenth century with German Protestant biblical study that emphasized close analysis of the text, including its composition, its use of earlier sources and traditions, and its ideas in relation to comparable ones in the surrounding cultures.^{xii} Today we know more than ever about the cultural, social, linguistic and archaeological background of the Bible: “Cities long gone have been excavated. Lost languages have been recovered and have given us greater understanding of biblical Hebrew [and Greek]. Layers of composition in the text allow us to understand its significance at various points in its development.”^{xiii}

There’s really no way to approach the Bible literally without engaging in interpretation. The original texts disappeared centuries ago, and current manuscripts are full of copyists corrections.^{xiv} The Hebrew texts of the Jewish scriptures and Greek texts of the New Testament were translated first into Latin and then back again, and only then into the Elizabethan English from which our contemporary translations derive.^{xv} Any translation is by definition an interpretation, as anyone who’s read a novel in its original language and then in English translation will attest.^{xvi}

Furthermore, there are parts of the Bible that demand interpretation by their nature, like the parables of Jesus. There are other parts of the Bible that are obviously metaphorical and invite interpretation, like describing Jesus as light of the world,^{xvii} vine,^{xviii} cornerstone,^{xix} bread of life,^{xx} shepherd,^{xxi} bridegroom,^{xxii} lamb,^{xxiii} alpha and omega,^{xxiv} word,^{xxv} and way,^{xxvi} among many other names. God is regularly described as having hands and feet and ears and eyes, but of course both the biblical authors and we know that’s not a literally accurate way of describing God. Texts which relate events that really happened, like the exile of Jews to Babylon in the sixth century B.C., have a metaphorical interpretation as well in relation to an archetype of exile and return, in relation to an abiding image of a defective human condition and its remedy.^{xxvii}

There’s another problem, though, in understanding the scriptures which may be much more relevant to this congregation in Memorial Church. Peter Gomes describes a woman who had heard Biblical readings in a liberal, mainline church every Sunday for years and years. She explained to him that “listening to the lessons in church is like

eavesdropping on a conversation in a restaurant where the parties on whom you are listening in are speaking fluent French, and you are trying to make sense of what they are saying with your badly remembered French 101. You catch a few words and are intrigued, trying to follow, but after a while you lose interest, for the effort is too great and the reward too small.” As Gomes puts it, “Because it is unlike any other book, reading the Bible is an intimidating enterprise for the average person. To remind the reader that the Bible is not a book but a library of books, written by many people in many forms over many years for many purposes, is to further complicate the ambition and add to the frustration.”^{xxviii}

This kind of exasperation must have consumed President Grover Cleveland when he said: “The Bible is good enough for me, just the old book under which I was brought up. I do not want notes or criticisms or explanations about authorship or origins or even cross-references. I do not need them or understand them, and they confuse me.”^{xxix} Here I have some concrete suggestions for President Cleveland in understanding the scriptures, and for any of you who feel like him or Gomes’ parishioner in understanding the scriptures. First, get a copy of Peter Gomes’ *Good Book*. It will get you fascinated in the Bible while entertaining you, stimulating you, and painlessly educating you. The first part generally explains what the Bible as a whole is all about, how to think about its interpretation and how the Bible has been used in America. The second part takes on hard issues that the Bible has been said to address in both directions, like slavery, anti-Semitism, drinking, homosexuality, and the role of women. The last part looks the biblical perspective on a series of more general topics like wealth, joy, temptation, and the good life. By the time you’re through, you’ll feel much more confident about studying the Bible and understanding what it’s saying in both ancient and modern contexts.

Then, get a hold of biblical scholar Marcus Borg’s book *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*. He starts out by giving you new lenses for seeing the Bible, recognizing realities of the twenty-first century like this: We know people now from other world religions and we know something about their traditions; this makes exclusivist claims of Christianity to being the only way to God impossible to accept. We also know now that the way people think and act is pervasively shaped by the time and place in which they live, as well as by their race, gender, and social and economic class. Furthermore, we’re modern people with an Enlightenment mind-set that accepts scientific ways of knowing and also insists on historically reliable information. But we’re also are living on the boundary of a post-modern worldview which looks beyond the limits of our current scientific and historical perspectives to appreciate art, narrative, and spirituality in new ways that help us supplement our scientific and historical understanding of reality.^{xxx} The Bible therefore becomes seen as the product of two historical communities: ancient Israel and the early Christian movement. The Bible is a human product – not “God’s revealed truth,” but a response of these two ancient communities to God, describing what they think is required of them ethically by God, how God has entered and influenced their lives, what kinds of prayers, praises and practices are the most appropriate way to honor and worship God, and their hopes and dreams as a people of God. As a human product, the Bible is not “absolute truth” but a relative and culturally-conditioned truth. It’s related to a particular time and place and not others, particular peoples and not others, particular languages and worldviews and not others,

This is not to deny the reality of God, certainly, nor to deny that the Bible was written and compiled by people who felt inspired by God. But the Bible does not have “plenary inspiration” in the sense that every word was directly inspired by God and therefore is a divine product rather than a human one. Instead, the Bible is a product of people moved by their experience of the Spirit of God, in their own specific times and circumstances.^{xxxix}

Borg then spends most of his book providing an overview of the contents of the entire Bible, divided into seven major areas: creation stories; the torah or Pentateuch or first five books of the Hebrew Bible; the Prophets of Israel; the wisdom tradition of Proverbs, Psalms, Ecclesiastes, Job and more; the four gospels; the letters of Paul; and the book of Revelation. By this time Gomes’ parishioner would have moved from French 101 to intermediate French and really be enjoying the conversation. President Cleveland would be mesmerized by explanations about authorship and origins and doing his own cross-referencing.

Now you, along with him and our French speaker, should be chomping at the bit for a good study Bible, if you don’t already have one, but one that doesn’t give you more than you really need. Here I’d suggest the *HarperCollins Study Bible*.^{xxxix} It has a small set of color maps at the back with an index, a brief introduction to the Bible as whole with time lines from 3000 B.C. to 150 A.D., brief introductions to all books of the Bible, and enormously helpful notes to the entire text which consume up to half of each page at the bottom (all of which you can ignore if you want). You can also ignore, or find incredibly useful, various tools scattered about the study Bible, like a chronology of the kings of Israel and Judah and tables of parallel passages in the four Gospels,

So, is there anything missing now in understanding the scriptures, or at least getting a running start at it? Peter Gomes, when he was being trained for the ministry at the Harvard Divinity School, was asked to write this on the flyleaf of his Bible: “Apply yourself closely to the text; [then] apply the text closely to yourself.”^{xxxix} Marcus Borg speaks of the sacramental use of the Bible: using it for personal and communal devotional practice as “a mediator of the sacred, a means whereby the sacred becomes present to us.”^{xxxix} Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the author of Revelation even speak about “eating” God’s words. Analogously to the sacrament of the Eucharist, where we eat bread and wine as a way to have Jesus become concretely present to us, we are asked by these authors inwardly to digest the words of the Bible, making them a kind of nourishment or morsels of bread themselves.^{xxxix}

I personally have found two traditional Christian spiritual practices to be very helpful in applying the text of the Bible closely to myself in this sacramental way, after doing the intellectual work of applying myself closely to the text. One is the method of prayer designed by the founder of the Jesuits, Saint Ignatius of Loyola. It involves meditating on Biblical passages by trying to put oneself fully into the characters and settings of the text being used. Ultimately, when this is done fully, Ignatius teaches that one becomes aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit in and through the prayer exercise and of a deep kind of scriptural understanding which manifests in personal transformation. The other practice is *lectio divina*. One sits in a contemplative state and listens while a passage of scripture is read aloud a number of times, with interspersed periods of silence. Again, the purpose is to listen for the Spirit of God speaking through the words of the Biblical text.^{xxxix}

How are we to understand the scriptures? Jesus in this morning's gospel lesson becomes for his disciples not just a human being of the past but a figure of the present, subsequent to his physical death. The experience of the Christian community in general is that Jesus has continued to appear through the Holy Spirit generation after generation up to the present time. The scriptures are a primary mediator of his presence with us. Yet, the message of the scriptures is not self-evident. It requires a process of opening the mind, both intellectually and spiritually. For Christians, the Jewish scriptures become part of a long story that culminates in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. Then Jesus becomes directly identified with the light of ages and of nations that has inspired every race and every time. The Word that is God abides forever and revelation is not sealed. It is written deep in all of our souls and continues to shine today, forever new.^{xxxvii}

NOTES

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- ⁱ Luke 24: 36b-48.
- ⁱⁱ Luke 24: 13-35.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Luke 24: 36-37.
- ^{iv} Luke 26: 44-45.
- ^v *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), Vol. IX, p. 486.
- ^{vi} *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 925.
- ^{vii} Peter J. Gomes, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart* (New York: Avon Books, 1996), pp. 29-30.
- ^{viii} Marcus Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), p. ix.
- ^{ix} *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- ^x Gomes, *Good Book*, p. 31.
- ^{xi} *Ibid.*, p. 34.
- ^{xii} *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 1, pp. 1-2.
- ^{xiii} *Ibid.*, p. 104.
- ^{xiv} *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- ^{xv} Gomes, *Good Book*, p. 41.
- ^{xvi} *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 1, p. 5.
- ^{xvii} E.g., John 8:12.
- ^{xviii} E.g., John 15: 1.
- ^{xix} E.g., 1 Peter 2:6.
- ^{xx} E.g., John 6:48.
- ^{xxi} E.g., John 10:16.
- ^{xxii} E.g., Matthew 9:15.
- ^{xxiii} E.g., John 1:29.
- ^{xxiv} E.g., Revelation 1:8.
- ^{xxv} E.g., John 1:1.
- ^{xxvi} E.g., John 14:6.
- ^{xxvii} Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1989), pp. 49-50.
- ^{xxviii} Gomes, *Good Book*, p. 6.
- ^{xxix} *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- ^{xxx} Borg, *Reading the Bible Again*, pp. 13-17.
- ^{xxxi} Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, p. 4.
- ^{xxxii} *The HarperCollins Study Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).
- ^{xxxiii} Gomes, *Good Book*, p. xi.
- ^{xxxiv} Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, p. 57.
- ^{xxxv} *Ibid.*, pp. 58-59.
- ^{xxxvi} Borg, *Reading the Bible Again*, p. 32.
- ^{xxxvii} Samuel Longfellow, "Light of Ages and of Nations," Hymn # 189 in *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).