



## Towards understanding the Bible

Much Bible reading is done without achieving any real understanding — indeed without any serious attempt to understand. There are various pieces of advice that could be given on this matter but here we want to touch on just one small area of a very large subject.

*The Larger Catechism* tells how the Scriptures are to be read: "...with a firm persuasion that they are the very word of God ... with a desire to know, believe and obey ... with diligence and attention to the matter and scope of them; with meditation, application, self-denial and prayer".

All these are excellent points, worth pondering and practising. One I want to develop is connected with "*diligence and attention to the matter and scope*" of the Scriptures. That says we're meant to look very carefully at the actual text of Scripture. What I've to say has got to do with study at that level.

### **Different perspectives**

I had known Edinburgh all my days. Every summer we spent a month's holiday there and my grandfather took us round the sights: the castle and the museums, the libraries and the cemeteries; the ducks at Duddingston and the cricket at Carlton.

But when I went to the University there, the Geography class went on a "field trip" round Edinburgh and the evidence of how the city had expanded at different stages in its history was pointed out to us. It was a real eye-opener. I'd always known the city, but seeing it from a historical point of view gave new meaning to familiar locations.

It was the same with the Bible when I went to the Free Church College. I had been brought up on the Bible but I'd never thought to look at it from a historical point of view.

In the New Testament class we started with the Epistle to the Galatians. It had never occurred to me to ask: who were the Galatians? How did Paul get to know them? Why did he write to them? But through dealing with such questions in class, I came to understand the Bible in a way I never had before. When I saw it from a historical point of view, I grasped more fully the "matter and scope" of the Bible.

I think every serious Bible-reader ought to look at the Scriptures from that point of view. To appreciate its historical background — to ask about each book "who wrote it? why? when? where from?" — is important. We don't need to be "scholars" to appreciate the Bible, but a little basic knowledge of the Bible's historical circumstances can be a step towards a better understanding of it.

### **Understanding words**

Understanding words is actually a far more complicated business than people usually realise. Take a simple sentence like this newspaper headline: "Major abandons poll tax". We know what it means but if we look at it carefully, we see that some of the words have actually got a wide variety of meanings.

"Major" can be an adjective meaning "more important"; or a noun referring to an army officer; or a verb meaning "to give special attention to" (especially to a subject of study). Here it is none of these, but the Prime Minister's surname.

"Poll" too has a variety of meanings. In some parts of Scotland to "have a poll" has nothing to do with holding elections but refers to having a haircut! It is also a type of parrot. In the phrase "poll

tax", it means a "head" tax — though I suspect some people think it means a tax on everyone whose name is on the voter's roll.

So the words used have a variety of meaning but despite this, we have no difficulty in saying what "Major abandons poll tax" means. Why? Because we understand the historical circumstances to which the words refer. To people who didn't know the "when" or "where" or "why" of these words they could convey a different meaning altogether — as we'll see.

## **Historical background**

It is especially difficult to understand words that come to us from across the ages. There isn't just a language gap that needs to be bridged but one in our understanding of their history and customs; of their style of life and traditions.

Imagine, if you can, how experts in the future might interpret that headline: "Major abandons poll tax". Suppose it comes to light in the distant future when our own age and its history belong to a dim and forgotten past, studied only by a handful of scholars who gain their knowledge from archaeological remains and fragmentary records. What will such scholars make of these few words?

Though English will then be nonexistent, linguists will know at least some of the various meanings of the words used. With that knowledge, historians will study the sentence. I can imagine a historian puzzling over such words and writing something like this in some learned archaeological journal:

"There is an inherent contradiction in this statement. If a Major was in charge of government, as the statement clearly implies, then at that point in time the country in question must have been run by a military government. A corollary of this is that in such circumstances there would be no elections and hence no "polls". So there could be no poll-tax in the usual meaning of the word.

"We must therefore adopt an alternative meaning for "poll" — it refers to the cutting of the hair."

*"No evidence has hitherto come to light that a tax on haircutting ever existed. However, some support for this theory comes from discoveries of the remains of young men who at the time of their death had very long hair. These remains date from about the time of this find. It is perhaps possible that the custom of wearing long hair prevailed during the time of the poll-tax as a tax avoidance measure..."*

## **The error**

What led to this remarkably mistaken conclusion? Not the method used but a lack of knowledge. We have imagined them not having enough historical knowledge to understand the "when?" and "why?" of the headline. They therefore failed to take into account that "Major" was a man's name and so they misinterpreted the whole message. They hadn't fully understood the circumstances of the times in which the words were written.

Incomplete knowledge leads to mistakes in understanding. Where there is that knowledge, fuller understanding comes. That's the way it is with the Bible — as some examples will show.

## **What the writer meant**

How many people interpret "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" (Ephesians 5:19) as if it were written in 20th century Scotland! They take "psalms" to refer to the book of Psalms, "hymns" to refer to the likes of The Church Hymnary and "songs" to the chorus-type praise used in some evangelical churches. That interpretation totally disregards the historical circumstances in which the words were written.

The question to be answered is not "what do these words mean to us?" but "what did these words mean to the writer, in the his own circumstances?"

Since that's the question, we've got to try and find out as much as we can about the writer, when he lived, how he thought and why he was writing. Accurate knowledge of these facts will help us to understand what Paul meant by psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.

### **What customs teach**

Jesus tells of a woman who lost one of her ten silver coins (Luke 15:8-10). The diligence of her search and her joy at its recovery depict spiritual realities. But the parable gains in meaning if we realise that the coin lost was one of the ten silver coins linked together with a silver chain which formed the headdress of a married woman. The lost coin was not simply of monetary value but of considerable sentimental importance — like a lady today losing a wedding ring.

In many little ways, knowledge of the customs of the time — how people lived, dressed or did things — will light up our understanding of the Scriptures.

### **What the people thought**

We know what "the Messiah" means. But unless we understand what people in Jesus' time meant by it, we'll fail to appreciate quite a few passages in the gospels. To them, "the Messiah" and the "Son of David" spoke of a king who would wield military authority and make Israel great, rather like King David had done.

The disciples shared this common outlook about the Messiah. That's why they were so slow to grasp that Jesus had to die (Mark 8:31-33; 9:31-32); that's what accounts for their wrangling as to who should be greatest (Mark 9:34; Luke 22:24) and for the request that James and John should be given the most prominent places in his kingdom. They had no idea of the spiritual nature of the Messiah's kingdom.

This also accounts for Jesus' question to the teachers of the law: "*How is it that they say the Christ is the Son of David?*" (Luke 20:41-44). Jesus seems to be implying that the Christ (the Messiah) isn't the Son of David. But actually he is challenging the general view of the time that the Son of David was merely a great earthly king. He is pointing to a more exalted concept yet as to what is involved in being the Son of David.

If we do not appreciate the background against which Jesus is speaking, the way of thinking of the people at the time, our understanding of the Scriptures will be restricted.

### **A method of reading**

Too often we read the Scriptures without asking ourselves any questions. That shows no diligence regarding the "scope and matter of the Scriptures".

Too often when we ask questions we jump straight to: "what does this passage mean to *me*? What does it say to *my* circumstances *today*?" These are good questions to ask but we'll be freed from the danger of reading our own ideas into the Scriptures if we ask first: "what did this mean to *the writer*? How does it fit in with *his* circumstances *then*?"

Immediately we do this, we're asking ourselves questions that appear beyond our ability to answer. But help is at hand. Careful attention to the argument of the writer or to historical details which the writer supplies about his circumstances can give some guidance. Then there are books about Bible times that can help us to grasp the historical background of the passage.

To build up, little by little over the years, a store of such background knowledge can be of the greatest possible benefit in grasping the message of the Scriptures more clearly.

### **Proper balance**

There's nothing unspiritual about this approach to the Bible. We are not saying that by the mechanical application of some technique of study all will be revealed. To see the Bible as a book

with its own historical setting is but one step towards the better understanding of the Scriptures; something to be combined with other efforts to appreciate the message of the Scriptures, such as those mentioned in the answer quoted from *The Larger Catechism*. It is part of the diligent attention to the scope and matter of the Scriptures which must not be divorced from "application, self-denial and prayer". It is no substitute for enlightening grace but a legitimate and necessary use of helps that providence has placed at our disposal.

There's no need to be suspicious of this approach. Students in the Free Church College are trained in this method; most respected commentators use it; and your minister follows — or should follow — this path in all his preparations for the pulpit. Indeed it's a method which many ordinary people have been following without realising it. The more specific the attention given to it, the more rewarding it will be.

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