

What Makes for Good Bible Study?

The Intersection of Three Worlds

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14 August 2008

“I know that text by heart – but I know it rings true!” These warm the heart of any teacher. A familiar text suddenly became a truthful text. This kind of epiphany often



happens in spite of the lesson plan. But good bible study requires a three-fold preparation. A text that “rings true” bears witness to a number of truths: a truthful rendering of the context in which the text was written, a truthful account of the author’s intent, and finally, a truthful insight into the reader’s own experience. In her masterful book on biblical interpretation, *The Revelatory Text* (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999) New Testament scholar Sandra Schneiders argues that insight happens at the intersection of three worlds: the world *behind* the text, the world *of* the text, and the world *in front of* the text.

What better way to explore each of these worlds than as part of a bible study? Let’s look at the opening of John’s gospel, particularly the way the author introduces us to Jesus, the person the gospel is all about, and to the central theme of the gospel: discipleship.

THE WORLD BEHIND THE TEXT

The first world to consider as we examine these opening verses of John’s gospel is the world behind the text. The gospel comes from *somewhere*, a particular place. What are the peculiar social and political, ethnic and economic realities peculiar to that place – and how do they play out in the text? Attending to this world asks that we attend to the context behind a given text.

John’s gospel is probably the last gospel to be written, coming from the second century of the Common Era, a period scholars have narrowed to somewhere between 80 and 110. The first generation of the apostles has passed away, as have all those who heard Jesus’ words first-hand. People expected the immediate return of Jesus, but he didn’t come back. Now people struggle to write his teachings down and to order the

events of his life, death, and resurrection. Scattered communities hunker down for the long haul, organizing leadership for the discipleship to which they'd been called.

A defining feature of this early period is a developing tension between Christians and Jews. Christianity began as a sect within Judaism, and Jesus himself was a Jew. But as the mission to the Gentiles expanded, Christianity seemed broader in its embrace than simply "the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Indeed, John's gospel features the conversion of a Samaritan woman (John 6); it portrays Samaritans as more ready in some cases to believe in Jesus than his own countrymen and women were. Jews and Samaritans despised each other. The parable of a *good* Samaritan (Luke 10) would have been incredible to a Jew to a Jew of Jesus' time: there were only *bad* Samaritans! John's gospel presents Jesus in immediate conflict with the Jewish leaders.

Yet, the gospel also drinks deeply of the rich poetry and prophecy of the Hebrew scriptures, and Jesus' initial followers in John's gospel include Jewish teachers. Even though he had to come see Jesus under cover of night, Nicodemus was a Pharisee (3:1), and Nathanael was probably a Jewish rabbi. When Jesus calls him, he's sitting under a fig tree (1:48), a popular place to teach because it was out of the blistering sun.

The tension between Christians and Jews, the delay of the second coming, the demise of the original apostles: all this is part of the context for John's gospel. The world behind the text figures prominently in any good bible study.

Yet too often bible study gets stuck in context – and never makes it out of the Ancient Near East into the mind and heart of the author, much less into the mind and heart of the reader in today's present. People who get stuck in the world behind the text make great biblical archeologists, far more at home in the past than in the present. For good bible study to happen, two other worlds must intersect this very important first world: the world of the text and the world in front of the text.

THE WORLD OF THE TEXT

Regardless of the world that generates it, the text creates a world of its own. The author of John's gospel wants to highlight what he considers important about Jesus; he wants to background other things. Certainly the author claims to be writing as one of those who knew Jesus – though chronologically it would have been impossible to have lived that long! Yet, the author writes in the persona of the beloved disciple, "the one whom Jesus loved" (13:23). Closing out his account, the author writes: "This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them...." (21:24; Cf. 21:20).

Attention to the world of the text demands that we look at the structure of the text itself, and John's gospel divides into two distinct parts, aside from its prologue and introduction (chapter 1), the passion and resurrection stories (chapters 18-20), and an epilogue (chapter 21). The first part of John's gospel consists of a series of "signs and wonders," miracles and healings Jesus does, each of which is followed by some account of tension with the Jewish leaders (chapters 2-12). The second part of John's gospel describes a Last Supper – which interestingly doesn't feature food but feet! – and Jesus' "farewell discourse." If the first part of John's gospel reveals Jesus to be the Word of

God made flesh, the second part of John's gospel tells disciples how to witness to such a Word: "...love one another as I have loved you" (15:12). All of John's gospel leads to this final counsel. John is all about discipleship, and discipleship is all about love.

This is the world of the text, the canvas the author has prepared for his striking portrait of Jesus. Not surprisingly, John's gospel doesn't begin with a birth narrative, but with the calling of the disciples. We meet Jesus as he first meets his disciples. And look at how he calls them! The first words out of Jesus' mouth in John's gospel frame a question: "What are you looking for?" (1:38) Then as now, people are all looking for something – or someone – to satisfy their deepest longings. Jesus knows and addresses that profound desire. Intrigued and recognizing they are in the presence of someone from whom they might learn something, the disciples respond: "Where are you staying?" And Jesus answers: "Come and see" (1:39). These are the second words out of Jesus' mouth, and they are words of gentle invitation. They also betray the author's intense interest with seeing and believing, a theme he explores with Thomas after the resurrection (20:24-31). Indeed, the most compelling miracle in the gospel involves the healing of a "man born blind" (9:1-41). When Jesus restores his vision, the man shows that he sees more clearly and more truthfully than anyone around him. The author of John's gospel highlights this story with dialogue and direct speech, a signal that the encounter should be taken seriously.

Finally, Jesus closes the initial encounter with his disciples with the familiar words of calling, "Follow me" (1:43). In John's gospel, these are among the first words Jesus says to his disciples; the author also closes the calling of the disciples with them. The ending of the gospel intentionally echoes its opening. The risen Christ concludes a conversation with Peter with the words "Follow me" (21:22). Jesus clarifies with Peter what those who love him do: "Feed my lambs...Tend my sheep....Feed my sheep...." (21:15-17). And then he calls Peter again, just as he called him in the beginning.

Attention to the world of the text invites us into "the world according to John," a unique drama with its own story to tell. Yet, if we took up residence in the world of the text, we'd never get out of the author's head. People who get stuck in the world of the text make great literary critics, but they forget where the text came from – and they can never tell you why it should be important to *us*. For that last element of good bible study, we need to attend to a third world: the world in front of the text.

THE WORLD IN FRONT OF THE TEXT

Finally, the text is more than a text: it is a *sacred* text. That means it speaks with authority to all times and to all people. We call it "scripture," and we call it scripture because we believe it has something to say to us now, both as a community and as individuals. It is a living word for us today. Biblical archeologists can tell us about the world behind the text; literary critics can tell us about the world of the text – but only we can determine its meaning for us today. These two other worlds inform the meaning scripture has in the present – but they don't exhaust it. In a sense, the readers are experts in this third world, the world in front of the text, because this is where we stand.

Consider how Jesus' words in John's gospel address us – today. “What are *you* looking for?” What are our deepest desires? Even as we pose this question to ourselves, we confess that we believe in a God who cares about desire. Faith is not just a “head trip;” it is first and foremost a “heart trip.” The Jesus of John's gospel cares about our hearts. As we think about what we seek, Jesus asks us to consider who we love, where we love, and how we love. As we wrestle with Jesus' question from the first chapter of John's gospel, we ought to hear the counsel he gives to disciples then and now from his “farewell discourse”: “Love one another...” (15:12). We also ought to hear the consequences of love that Jesus outlines for Peter: “Feed my lambs.... Tend my sheep.... Feed my sheep” (21:15-17).

“Come and see:” this is what Jesus says next. The grammar is all command, but the sense is invitation. In John's gospel, Jesus beckons us to simply look, both by noticing what's right in front of us, but also by attending to it in the deeper sense of “beholding” it. “Behold” is a great biblical word that combines looking at something through the lens of love. “Behold the Lamb of God – “ are words to which the only proper response is “Wow!” Or more liturgically: “Glory be to you!” These words ask us to consider all those places of invitation and epiphany in our own lives. Where are we bidden? What do we love? Whom do we love?

Finally, how does Jesus address each of us in particular in his call of discipleship: “Follow me.” When I want to know where I am going I usually “mapquest” for directions. I get a sequence of streets to navigate, with all turns marked, all distances calculated, and a destination firmly in place. It's different when we're following a person. We never know quite where we're going; we never know how long it will take to get wherever it is we're going. We look only toward who's in front. That's the way of knowing the right direction.

Attention to the world in front of the text requires careful attention to God's work in our own lives and in the contexts in which we live. God's Word is a living word, and it addresses us today as both in consolation and challenge.

However, if this is the only world we bring to the text, we risk psychologizing the text or making it captive to our own social politics. People who get stuck in this world become expert prooftexters, holding the living Word of God prisoner to the present. This world needs the challenge of the world behind the text and the world of the text to keep it honest.

Good bible study happens when all three worlds collide: the world behind the text, the world of the text, and the world in front of the text. The dangers of archaeology, literary criticism, and prooftexting beset any bible study. Yet when these three worlds intersect, they come together with power. A familiar text suddenly “rings true.”

An old Carmelite nun said it best. When asked how she read scripture daily and over so many years, she simply said: “I read the text until it surprises me.”