

What the Biblical Text Meant and What It Means

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It is quite interesting to sit in a Sabbath School class and listen to the discussion of a biblical passage listed in the Bible Study Guide. There are some classes who stay with the historical perspective of the text. They discuss the text or story in its original setting, for example, the Book of Daniel in its sixth century B.C. context. Seldom, if at all, is the text used to address our current situation. There are other classes which apply a biblical text directly to our times without taking in consideration the time and circumstances, when the biblical book was written, although it can be quite helpful to understand what was, for example, going on when the Book of Amos was penned (c. eighth century B.C.).

Obviously both approaches are extremes, and it would be best to deal with both issues, the past and the present. However, an important question must be raised: Although in one way or another we have to distinguish between the situation of the original hearers of the biblical message and the situation of the present listeners to the same message, is the message basically still the same and does it address us even today or should it be modified and adapted to a modern culture and setting?

I. The Concept "What a Text Meant and What It Means"

K. Stendahl has discussed and defended the concept--widely accepted in theological and scholarly circles--that we must clearly distinguish between what the text meant in its original setting and what the text means for us today.¹ This has also influenced Adventist theologians, pastors, and church members. Some have suggested that issues such as homosexuality, divorce and remarriage, and the wearing of jewelry must be interpreted in light of the present cultural situation rather than in the context of the ancient texts of Scripture.

It is true that we are living in the twenty-first century A.D. and not in the seventh century B.C. or in the first century A.D. and that our world today is different from the ancient Near East. Most of us speak languages other than those used by the writers of the Bible, and most of our cultures including their respective world views, customs, food, art, and many other things differ from the cultures described in the Bible. Therefore, we are called to carefully investigate the biblical texts and try to understand the languages, the times, and the circumstances under which these texts were written. We must try to see with the eyes and hear with the ears of those who lived centuries ago. By attempting to overcome these barriers of time, language, and culture, we believe that we can come close to the biblical text and can apply it to our situation today. Still the question remains whether or not we need to sharply distinguish between what the text meant and what the text means.

II. Problems with Such a Concept

Oftentimes behind this question lies the idea and the agenda that the biblical text must be reapplied to our present situation in an absolutely new way. When this is done, biblical vocabulary is still used, however with a completely new meaning. For example, it is claimed that the resurrection of Jesus, which according to the New Testament is a guarantee for the future physical resurrection of the redeemed, was not a historical and physical resurrection. Therefore, it merely points to a spiritual resurrection of the believers to a new dimension of life here and now, whatever that may mean.² By following this approach we would replace God's original intentions with the authority of the human interpreter and would open the text to innumerable interpretations, running the risk of replacing truth with relativism and pluralism.

If biblical texts evolved by natural processes without divine revelation and inspiration--as sometimes assumed--their message is certainly limited to a specific time and culture. If on the other hand Scripture is the Word of God written by human authors, it will transcend these boundaries and reach us even today.

The letter to the Colossians was not limited to that church (Col. 4:16), but was also important for the church in Laodicea. The Book of Revelation by being addressed to seven churches points to its universal importance; and by containing a blessing for all those, who would hear and read it, surpasses the boundaries of place, time, and culture. In 1 Corinthians 10:6 and 11, Paul stresses twice that Israel's history is an example for the New Testament church. Between these two statements Paul warns against idolatry, fornication, presumption, and grumbling against God by using historical accounts dealing with God's covenant people in the Old Testament. In Hebrews 11, the heroes of faith are introduced. In Hebrews 12:1-2a, a conclusion for the author's audience is drawn: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith . . ."

Scripture also points to the principle of personalizing biblical texts. What God has done for the Exodus generation applies likewise to later generations. They still participate in his saving actions (Deut. 5:2-4). Similarly, the Christian believer participates already here and now in Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension (Gal. 3:29; Eph. 2:6). If, however, the principle "What the text meant and what it means" is applied in a radical way, the present-day correspondence or application could have little to do with the original intention of the text.

Furthermore, we need to keep in mind that in spite of differences there is also a high degree of continuity in humanity independent of time, culture, and circumstances especially when it comes to moral issues as well as broad psychological and anthropological principles.³

"The Bible clearly teaches that the unity of humankind derived from their first parents is more basic than the diversity of cultural expression. Paul states the proposition succinctly: 'From one man he made every nation of men' (Acts 17:26). The creation accounts of our first parent, Adam, in Genesis 1 and 2, describe man made in the image of God. Following the empirical method, anthropologists and psychologists have also discovered a unity in humankind, a commonality which they locate in the felt needs and functional, perceptual, and intellectual operations that are constant from culture to culture. . . Not only does God address cultural tasks to man as man (Gen. 1:28; 9:1-3), he calls and directs individuals as key leaders in his saving work irrespective of their culture. . . The unity of humankind created in God's image, so unequivocally maintained from beginning to end in the Bible, flies in the face of . . . epistemological and moral cultural relativism . . ."⁴

Although we believe that God through the prophets spoke in certain situations, His message transcends these situations. It has been correctly said that Scripture is not culturally or historically conditioned but culturally or historically constituted. It is given in a specific time and cultural setting, but it goes beyond these cultures and impacts us today.⁵

III. The Usefulness of "What a Text Meant and What It Means"

In spite of the problematic nature of the concept "What a text meant and what it means today" it can be useful in the following ways: (1) It reminds us that while studying Scripture we must give sufficient attention to both the text in its original setting and its significance for modern readers. (2) This concept helps us to be aware of the issue of permanence in Scripture. When dealing with the Decalogue it is quite evident that what the text meant and what it means are identical. The New Testament writers have affirmed the lasting nature of the Ten Commandments (Rom. 7:7, 12; 13:8-9; Jam. 2:8-12) and so have Jews and Christians throughout the centuries. But what about other commandments such as the one that a rebellious son should be killed (Deut. 21:18-21)? Is what the text meant still the same today or does the text mean something else? Which parts in Scripture are permanent even in details, and which parts contain only a permanent principle?

We will now turn to this issue. A look at the different kinds of biblical texts may prove helpful in answering the questions just stated.

- (1) *Passages Dealing with Biblical Doctrines.* Scripture contains entire passages focusing on the presentation of a specific biblical doctrine.⁶ Biblical doctrines are independent of time and culture. A biblical teaching may not be fully understood by a particular generation, but, for instance, the biblical doctrine of the second coming of Christ is not true today and wrong tomorrow. Biblical doctrines may to a certain degree be couched in cultural terms--Hebrews 1 presents Jesus as king, and in the rest of the book He is the High Priest--but even today we understand that a king is the supreme ruler and that a priest functions as a mediator. Thus, there is no difference in what the text meant and what it means when it comes to biblical doctrines.
- (2) *Prophetic Passages and Promises.* A similar picture emerges with regard to biblical prophecy, predictions, and promises. Isaiah 53, describing God's suffering servant, Psalms 2 or 110, pointing to the Messiah, or Daniel 2 and 7, picturing world history until the final consummation, are transtemporal and transcultural. However, we must keep in mind that some prophecies and most promises contain an element of conditionality. Furthermore, we must distinguish between predictions and promises addressed to a certain individual or to a group of people and those predictions and promises that are addressed to all of humanity. The prophecies and promises directed toward specific individuals and groups cannot be applied to us today directly, although the underlying principles are still valid. On the other hand, the prophecies and promises given to humanity in general must be taken as they are.⁷
- (3) *Passages Containing Narratives.* Scripture contains many narrative sections including shorter or longer biographies. These do not always contain an evaluation of the behavior of the hero, and contemporary readers should not deduce from Scripture's silence that it condones the hero's actions. Narratives are to be distinguished from legal texts. Yet they must be made "relevant for contemporary believers without making them say something the original author did not intend to say."⁸ The basic principles underlying the narrative need to be uncovered and applied to the contemporary reader.
- (4) *Wisdom Passages.* Wisdom literature as found, for instance, in the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes contains proverbial sayings which "reflect what is typical or normal without suggesting or implying that there are never exceptions."⁹ Many of these sayings are so plain and make so much sense independent of culture and time that their application will be more or less an elaboration of what is already said.
- (5) *Passages Containing Commands.* The real challenge comes with passages that contain commands. Fortunately, Scripture tells us that some commandments or laws are not of a permanent nature such as the sacrificial and ceremonial laws.¹⁰ Likewise, the enforcement of the theocratic and civil laws of the Old Testament came to an end, when the theocracy ended.¹¹ Some laws were merely temporary concessions to the hardness of hearts of the Israelites (Matt 19:8), and in the New Testament Jesus restored God's original will (Matt 19:4-6, 8). The New Testament clearly teaches that the Ten Commandments are still valid and that certain Christian forms, such as baptism, foot washing, and the Lord's Supper, cannot be replaced or substituted by other forms, because they are "rooted in Jesus' explicit example and command."¹² In order to distinguish between permanent and non-permanent laws we should--among others--(1) explore the respective passages and their contexts to determine whether or not vocabulary is used that may point to a limited form of practice, (2) keep in mind that a limited audience may point to a limited application of a specific practice, and (3) trace the topic of investigation throughout the Bible to see whether or not changes have taken place, which may point to a limited application.¹³ "The basic assumption of our approach is that all biblical teaching--commands, promises, and statements of truth--is normative unless Scripture explicitly indicates otherwise."¹⁴ If after careful study it cannot be determined whether or not a

practice is permanent, “apply the Biblical precept of humility”¹⁵ and follow its practice precisely, even today. Permanent commands are valid in the same way they were before, while in the case of limited commands the underlying principle should be presented and applied to the present situation.

Conclusion

The principle that distinguishes between what the text meant and what it means has some validity when we look at certain biblical narratives, investigate prophecies and promises addressed to individuals or a specific group, and study texts dealing with divine commandments of a non-permanent nature. These passages cannot be transferred to our present reality on a one-to-one basis. The underlying principles contained in them must be found and applied to our present situation.

However, from the perspective of a close reading of Scripture the principle has serious flaws when it is used to discredit historical accounts, to reject supernatural interventions in the history of humanity, and to deny that there are innumerable one-to-one correspondences in Scripture in which what the text meant is precisely what it means today.

Therefore, we would suggest as a general rule that what the biblical text meant in its original setting, is in principle what the text means for us today. Jesus himself was convinced that Scripture was directed not only to the original audience but also to the generation of his time as well as to those to come, without subjecting it to a dehistoricizing or demythologizing process.¹⁶

¹Krister Stendahl, “Biblical Theology, Contemporary,” *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, 5 vols., ed. George A. Buttrick (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 1:418-432.

²This process is also called category translation. See, Langdon Gilkey, “Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language,” *The Journal of Religion* 41 (July 1961):204.

³For instance, to take one’s neighbor’s spouse is more or less unacceptable on a universal scale. The experiences of suffering, sickness, rejection, and death are familiar to almost all humans. The desire to be accepted, to be loved, to enjoy friendship and social interaction is common to all of us. See also Maslow’s hierarchy of needs in James F. Engel, *Contemporary Christian Communications: Its Theory and Practice* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1979), 112-114.

⁴William J. Larkin, Jr. *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics: Interpreting and Applying the Authoritative Word in a Relativistic Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 199.

⁵Frank M. Hasel, “Reflections on the Authority and Trustworthiness of Scripture,” in *Issues in Revelation and Inspiration* (Berrien Springs: Adventist Theological Society Publications, 1992), 208-209.

⁶Genesis 1-2 portrays the creator and creation. In Matthew 24 Jesus discusses His second coming. In Romans, Paul explains righteousness through grace by faith, and in 1 Corinthians 15 he spells out the doctrine of the resurrection. Revelation 20 contains the Millennium.

⁷When Jesus announces Peter’s denial and the possibility of his subsequent conversion (Luke 22:32, 34), he does not address us, although we are indirectly called not to follow his example, but to examine ourselves and repent, if needed. Cf. Robert B. Chisholm, Jr. *From Exegesis to Exposition: A Practical Guide to Using Biblical Hebrew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1998), 259. On the other hand, when Jesus promises eternal life to those who believe in him (John 3:36), all true disciples of Christ are included.

⁸Henry A. Virkler, *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 212.

⁹Chisholm, 258. For example, Proverbs 14:11 states that “the house of the wicked is destroyed, but the tent of the upright flourishes,” which is oftentimes true. However, sometimes believers are perplexed when they see “the prosperity of the wicked” (Ps. 73:3). Yet there is a future dimension in which this statement will come true.

¹⁰They were pointing to Jesus and have been fulfilled in Him (Heb. 10:1-18).

¹¹Cf. Richard M. Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation,” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, Commentary Reference Series vol. 12, ed. by Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 2000), 85-86, who has shown that the Old Testament itself already pointed to their limitations.

¹²Davidson, 86.

¹³Cf., Larkin, 353-356.

¹⁴Ibid., 354.

¹⁵Virkler, 228.

¹⁶See, e.g., Matt. 5:17-48; 24:20 and Exod. 20.

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