Do you understand what you are reading?


It was an unlikely meeting – on that desert road to Gaza, the queen of Ethiopia’s Minister of Finance, a politician, who had come to Jerusalem to worship, meets a Jewish Christian, Philip. The man was reading from a scroll of the book of Isaiah, that he must have bought in Jerusalem. Philip comes alongside him, listens to him struggle with the Hebrew, he’s reading Isaiah 53, He asks, “Do you understand what you are reading?” The answer? “How can I unless someone explains it to me?” Philip tells the man about Jesus, the Messiah; he believes, and is baptized.

I want to extract the question from its setting and broaden it. Imagine yourself with open Bible, Philip is asking us the question, “Do you understand what you are reading?” This is an important question, isn’t it?

I mean, Philip isn’t just asking this stranger To regurgitate what he’s been reading To show that he read the Hebrew correctly. Sometimes students prepare for exams -learn dates, names, events, formulas, sequences On the exam they’re asked: where, who, when etc

What Philip asked is much more Did you get Isaiah’s point? Did you get the meaning?
Yes, this is an important question.

Ever since the Reformation (16th C) we have claimed that the Bible is accessible to everyone who can read. That’s what our forbears, the Anabaptists said, that became their practice, they were known far and wide as “people of the book.” Back then, they used a rare word to talk about it: “the perspecuity of scripture.” [ease of being understood, clear, lucid']

It was a big deal then, having your own Bible, and reading it. Gutenberg’s printing press had been invented some 70 years before, and now, for the first time in history everyone had personal access to the Bible. They cherished the opportunity, the possibility. Before, only priests, monks and church officials had copies for their use.

Another reason the old question remains important is that our Confession of faith in Mennonite perspective, Article 4, States, “We believe all Scripture is inspired by God…we accept the Bible as God’s word written…the Bible is the essential book of the church…we commit ourselves to persist and delight in reading, studying and meditating on Scripture.”

To confess that the Bible is from God, to be able to read it in our language, to profess that it’s important for faith and life makes reading it necessary and important, but not simple. Having the best translation does not answer the questions we encounter.

On the one hand, the Bible is accessible to most everyone
- John 3:16 – don’t need a biblical scholar’s help here
- Psalm 23
- John 14:6, I am the way, the truth and the life.

On the other hand, when we go beyond the core biblical teaching of salvation, and try to understand the whole Bible then we often run into difficulties.

In Sunday school and in our homes, we tell the familiar stories of the Bible
- Creation
- Call of Abraham
- Moses and the exodus
- David and Goliath, and Bathsheba
- Jesus’ birth, life, cross, resurrection
- Emergence of the church on Pentecost
- Some Psalms and parables.

From these highlights of the story of God and his people The big picture of our faith is sketched
- God the creator
- Jesus, God’s son, Lord and Savior
- The Church, body of Christ on earth.
The disciples’ prayer
For most of these highlights, we don’t need a lot of help.

But our *Confession* claims we will delight in the whole thing, not only the highlights.

As our children become teens and enter adulthood,
  They need more than a string of individual stories to hang on to.
New questions arise: not only what are these stories, but what do they mean?
All these stories do come out of the one book,
  but it becomes clear that this is in reality not one book,
  but a library of 66 books, divided into two sections.

The teenager learns that the individual Bible stories
  are set in different periods of history
  different parts of the ancient Near East.
How do these parts hang together to tell one story?

Our children have heard *the Bible is God’s word*.
Fine, but as they mature they realize that a
  wide variety of people have had a hand in writing,
  compiling, editing and gathering the books into one.

And the human side shows up again and again:
  -individuals, separated geographically, 1500 years apart.
  -some were poets
  -some wrote history, with a peculiar slant
  -some created a new literary form, the gospels
  -some wrote using strange symbols and images. (Ezekiel, Daniel, Revelation)

And somewhere along the way it hits home:
  the Scriptures did not drop into someone’s lap one afternoon or on a Sunday!
And the ancient question that Philip asked the Ethiopian becomes relevant:
  Do you understand what you are reading?
  How do you understand what you read?

Some of the basics are accessible to all, but when we read it all, we need help.
And scholars have given decades of their lives to research
  -Raymond Brown, 1000 pages on the gospel of John
  -Waldemar Janzen, 500 pages on Exodus, and 200 more on ethics and the OT!

**How do you understand what you are reading?**
  a crucial, sometimes divisive question.

Example: take the words of the Lord’s Supper, “*Take, eat this is my body*.”
  RC, Lutheran, Mennonite interpretations.

Example: a visitor in my office
  Visitor in my office in the early 70’s. Do you take the Bible literally or not? Example of
  Genesis 1 and 2. Sequence of the stories different.
  These are theological poetry seeking to understand the origins.

Example of German Bible study
German Bible study group – Genesis. Assignment to read Genesis 1 and 2 for a week. By careful reading they noticed things. Sequence, names used for God.

The questions arise out of the text itself. They are not imposed on the text. Sometimes the problem lies in the false assumptions a reader brings to the text. Sometimes in the details themselves.

We proclaim the Bible as God’s word and we do not shy away from the sometimes complicated questions of reading and interpretation.

When we stumble across difficult questions we are to use our God-given understanding and work at solving them patiently.

What helps us to understand? Here are some guidelines:

I. It’s a body of literature gathered and compiled over centuries.
   what kind of literature is this text?
   Is it metaphor or poetry or epistle?
   Is it a narrative or a parable?
   Is it a Psalm or a piece of apocalyptic imagery?

We ponder a text and wonder not only, what might this text be saying to us, but also how is this text saying what it is saying?

Asking these questions we may often find some clues as to whether a text is to be taken literally or in some other way. And if the text is symbolic, we also ask how this symbol is used in other parts of the Bible.

II. Part of the process of understanding the text lies on the text’s side – there are things we must be aware of there, and part of the process of understanding the ancient text lies on our side of the gap.

You and I as readers, contribute to the understanding of the text.
Each of us brings our “life’s basket” along when we read. There’s a lot in your basket and in mine.
   -memories
   -earlier explanations
   -lingering questions on the back burners of our minds
   -the experiences of the moment
We drag it all along as we read the text.

To illustrate:
One, Proverbs 22:6
“Train a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it.”
What these words say to us is colored by the experiences we bring to them.
When parents of young children hear/read this verse it gives them hope that their child training will bear fruit.
When parents of teenagers hear this verse
   they may at times wonder about its validity – why?
   they are just having problems with their daughter/son
   and everything that they had taught earlier in life
   seems to have been thrown out the window, rejected.
She even says, she doesn’t believe that anymore.
   She wants to go her own way.
The words of the text in both settings are identical,
   but what the text says
   depends on what the parents bring to the text
   what they are dealing with at the time.

Two, reading a familiar Psalm is colored by the experiences we bring to it. 
When I started dealing with cancer eight years ago, I had many sleepless nights.
My mind was filled with questions:
   Why did this happen to me?
   Where is God when my life is in danger?
   What could I have done to prevent this?
At night, when I couldn’t sleep and the questions were presenting themselves afresh I would do several things: read, meditate, pray.

In the reading I included lots of Bible.
One night I read Psalm 121. I had read it often; I had heard it often. I like this Psalm.
   It provides comfort.
   “I lift up my eyes to the hills, from whence does my help come? My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth…neither slumbers nor sleeps…”

That night, comfort didn’t come easily.
I brought a new question to the familiar, comforting verse.
   My question was: How? How does help come from the Lord now?
Not a word about this in the Psalm.
   He just declares it - without explanation.
   No practical handle on how to access the help that is promised.

Another thing that we bring
to the reading of a text is a set of assumptions.
For many these may rarely become overt.

I gave the illustration of the young man in my office, years ago. It was self-explanatory for him that the Bible was to be taken literally. This affected and determined his understanding of any text. He was disturbed and upset when I challenged his underlying assumption about reading.

In other words, no one comes to the Bible, 
   nor to anything else for that matter, as a blank tablet!

It is impossible for us to come to a text as though we were an empty sheet.
Consciously or unconsciously we come to the texts 
   with our memories of past encounters,
   with a cluster of assumptions,
   and with our own experiences.
Every time we preachers prepare a sermon, our assumptions play a significant role. Many will not share their presuppositions with the listeners, but they can be deduced from a series of sermons, by careful listening. Wouldn’t it be helpful if sometimes speakers were explicit about their ground rules for interpreting the text?

Some additional assumptions About the Bible

- **it is the creation of the church** – the church did not arise because of Bible reading; there was no NT when the church arose. Paul proclaimed what he himself had received as oral tradition (1 Cor 15:1-5).
  Why is this important?
  It provides me with another question in my basket: why was it important to early believers that this writing was preserved?
  Why was the book of Jonah considered important? It was a challenge to the every narrowing view of Israel about its calling and about its relation to Gentiles.
  Why was Philemon important to the early church? Why was this short note from one man to another deemed to be the word of God to the whole church?

- **it is a critic of the church** –
  - to correct dangerous tendencies in the church, Galatians, against Judaizers
  - I Corinthians seeks to address problems that arose in the church: unity, immorality, court, freedom, separation, divorce and remarriage, worship, women, etc.

- **it is historical and occasional in nature** –
  We need to try to see how the culture of the time impacted the writing.
  Take 1 Cor 8 –10, e.g. meat offered to idols. Made sense to them, but we need to gain that insight through study. Then we can get closer to understanding what Paul was writing about.
  Or, take the familiar story of the lost sons and the waiting father in Luke 15. Kenneth Bailey, has explored the cultural background of this parable. *Poet and Peasant*. Twenty years in the Middle East. Took parables of Jesus to remote villagers and told the parables to them in their native tongue. The matter of an adult running, the duty of the first born to serve the main dish to the honored guest.
  And thirdly, take 1 Cor 11 – two main parts, section one about women, hair and silence, section two about the Lord’s supper.
  One is treated transculturally, while the attitude to women and the custom of head covering is usually considered time bound to that culture.
  We do not consider a woman without a head covering to be shameful or a loose woman. We make the distinction between a practice that is descriptively presented and used and another that is transculturally prescriptive.

- **it presents a plurality of viewpoints** –
On the basis of the Deut passage, people preach a gospel of prosperity and health. If you are faithful, God will pour out blessings in every area of life. So, when Job's friends came to console him, they argued on that basis. Since you are suffering, you must have sinned. Confess and all will be well. Job refused. After some 33 chapters, God shows up and tells the friends that they are wrong. Job is righteous and yet he suffers.

So we have a real tension in viewpoint between Dt 28 and the book of Job. What does Jesus do with this tension? He picks one side over the other. John 9 and Luke 13.

- it is to be read christo-centrally – not all parts are of equal weight. Our tradition has emphasized that we read the Bible this way. -means that some things are pre-christian and some anti-christian. And all is to be seen in the light of the clearest revelation of all, the person, teaching and life of Jesus. We seek to interpret it all in the light of Jesus.

Take the expression “an eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth” already in the OT this was radically reduced, in contrast to the ancients perception, Cain shall be avenged seven times, but Lamech seventy seven, Genesis 4:24. And in Mt 5 Jesus says the definitive word on the subject.

Take the book of Leviticus with its detailed prescriptions about daily life: what one is permitted to eat, what is to be avoided, how you must ceremoniously wash your hands, etc. What does Jesus do with these questions? One day he was asked, what is the greatest commandment? We know his answer, love God and your neighbor as yourself. With this answer he set aside all of the little details the Pharisees were hung up on. Those details are time bound and culturally specific.

Or Genesis 9:6 says, “whoever sheds the blood of man by man shall his blood be shed.” This is seen as the validation for capital punishment by many Christians. Yet this attitude is repealed by Jesus. If we read christo-centrally, we cannot base it on Gen 9:6 by simply stating, “Well, the Bible says so!”

To be read canonically - what does a given theme or text say within the whole? Perry Yoder and Mary Schertz have suggested the image of a tapestry, with dominant threads, and subdominant, as well as counterthreads, with various things emphasized. We need to keep the big picture in mind in order to assess the relative weight of various parts.

- it is both human and divine –
Inspired by Holy Spirit but written by unique individuals, who left their stamp on the document, in keeping with the intended audience. Mark and Matthew, Luke.

Human beings decided in 90 AD at the Council of Jamnia that the 39 books of the OT were now closed.

Human beings at the end of the third century,
decided that the 27 books of the NT were now closed.

- **it is to be interpreted in community**

  The whole church is involved in discerning the meaning of the Bible.

  Everyone’s understanding, interpretation is tested in the believing community.

  Paul in Beea: they examined the Scriptures to see if what Paul said was true. While some of the Bible is easily accessible, other parts take some effort.

  Let us continue to be in conversation with Scripture, to learn more about the God revealed there, as well as about ourselves and our opportunities in life. Let us value it as a lamp unto our feet and a light for our paths.