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READING THE BIBLE FAITHFULLY: A CONTEXTUALLY CONTEMPLATIVE MODEL
FOR EXEGESIS

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The formation of a canon was integral to the unification of the early church. Beyond an affirmation of the integral Old Testament texts, the church decided that four biographies of Christ, an early church history, and letters from influential church leaders and Apostles were important written texts around which they could receive instruction, encouragement, and mission together. The Scriptures were integrally important to life in the early church. Luther re-affirmed that importance as he seriously studied Scripture in the Protestant Reformation, declaring “Sola Scriptura” or that “only Scripture” could be his guide for Christian living. Even continuing into today, denominations persistently discuss the importance and relevance of the Bible to daily life, and how to faithfully read the text. Keeping all this history in mind, it is most helpful to read the Bible with much prayer together, knowing the literary and historical context of the passage; allowing the text to interpret itself, and submitting our questions through Scripture, not just our own logic.

First, if the Sacred texts are to be read for our devotional growth and instruction, the endeavor must be attempted with prayer. The Spirit has spoken through these stories, poems, genealogies, histories, and letters for millennia, and can continue to do so if we humbly allow it to happen. Such prayer, before, during, and after an encounter with the text can help us humbly approach the scriptures with our preconceived notions held loosely, as God holds us tightly. This prayer and the reading of Scripture should not be attempted alone every time. It was the church that pieced together the canon, and the church that preserved it for centuries; much of the New Testament is specifically written to communities and churches. It is integral to recognize a communal experience and understanding of Scripture, if we are going to be faithful to the text.

Within this framework of consistent prayer and engaged community, a reader can begin to identify the literary context of the work they are reading. For example, on our bookshelves we

may have biographies and books of poetry near one another, but we would never attempt to read a historical, biographical work with the same insight we would bring to a poem. Within the Bible there are ancient religious narratives, books of laws and census numbers, histories from positive and negative perspectives, wisdom sayings, poetry, songs, autobiographical stories from prophets, biographies of Jesus, and letters to an individual and to churches. There are so many different types of texts within the Bible, written by different people, for different reasons. We must know what the text we are looking at is, before we can attempt to analyze it. Beyond knowing simply what kind of text we are reading, we should seek to know the author(s) of the text, their perspective, and if the compiler of the passage may have edited the story for theological reasons. These larger literary framework questions tend to not be answered in the introductory information of evangelical study Bibles, because it seems as if acknowledging the multiplicity of voices in the text would undermine respect for the Scriptures. Though harder to find, this literary information is vital to understanding the text, and can usually be discovered in the notes of academic Bibles or within many commentaries.

After deciphering the literary context of a passage, perhaps the most important step to apply is discovering the historical context of a passage. Many of these texts were written thousands of years ago, in a middle eastern world that is extremely far removed from our own. We cannot assume that our presuppositions are accurate or can easily transfer to a text like this; instead we must work to understand what the writer would have intended for the text to mean to its audience. This requires a careful study of when the book was written and where. Many contextual questions need to be asked, such as: “who was leading Israel?”. “what other books or passages in the text were written concurrently?”, and “what else was going on around Israel or the Church at this point?” This can be a confusing task, because the canon is not ordered

chronologically, and we may miss pivotal understandings of the text by misunderstanding historical references and context. Only when a reader feels they have some grasp on the originally intended message can they begin to ponder what that message would mean for them.

Finally, Scriptures must be read in a way that allows them to interpret themselves, and speak with the clearest tone possible. When approaching Scripture humbly, in the right literary and historical context, some passages will still be hard to understand. Before attempting to answer the questions these passages pose ourselves, we should attempt to allow other Scriptures to interpret the passage in question. Jesus, Paul, and the authors of the Gospels all interpret Old Testament passages for modern readers in a compelling fashion. Beyond these sort of prophecy – fulfillment interpretations between the Old and New Testaments, the text will also sometimes answer interpretive questions on its own. For example, many Christians debate how the story of Sodom’s destruction relates to our modern understanding of homosexuality and sin. The text, in multiple places after this story goes on to tell the reader what Sodom’s sin was, and surprisingly, Ezekiel demonstrates that the sin of Sodom was arrogance, gluttony, and apathy (Ezk 16:48-50). In fact, the one time the Scriptures mention sex with the destruction of Sodom, homosexuality is not mentioned. This study of all the times Scripture mentions an event can help us better understand what is happening, and answer some of the questions we may raise.

Though the list could go on, and there are always new things to learn, if a reader begins with approaching the text humbly, in community, and with prayer as they decipher the literary and historical context and allow the Scriptures themselves to guide them, they will be well on their way to faithfully reading and understanding the Bible.