

The Value of Scripture Study

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The last time that I was present for an after-dinner speech, the speaker, a well-respected scholar who had just finished writing a commentary on a book of the Bible, decided to speak to us about the commentary that he had just written. Now, this would have been fine for some books of the Bible: John, say, or perhaps the letter to the Romans. But this scholar's commentary was on Leviticus.

Not too many are intimately aware of the contents of Leviticus. The book of Leviticus is mainly about what the priests, the levites, and the people of God need to do to keep themselves pure for God. Now, you may know that purity is not so much about removing the consequences of bad things you have done ("sin") but about removing the imperfections caused by things that just happen to people: people get sick, they have diseases, they have skin problems, they get rashes, they get sores, they ooze. And right after we had just finished a wonderful dinner, the Leviticus scholar spoke to us for close to an hour about the various skin problems, and health issues of the people of Israel.

Now, I would never do anything like that here. But, of course I just did. And you are probably all feeling a little bit as I did as I listened to that speech: you're squirming and scratching a bit! And that is because images are powerful – and not just pictures, for I have not shown you any. Merely speaking about these things from the book of Leviticus, written thousands of years ago, has conjured up images in your minds. As a result, you today, here at this banquet, can picture something of what I'm talking about, and, perhaps more importantly, you have a feeling, an emotion, a response to what I've been

talking about. Images can please us; they can excite us; they can make us happy or sad. Images can make us uncomfortable and squirm in our seats or feel something in the pit of our stomachs. They can make our skin itch.

Images create a world in our minds. Images in the realm of romance, or war, or sacrifice, or heroism are images that we seek to relate to in our own experiences of love, or conflict, or heroic actions. They might come to us in a novel or from a story told to us by our grandfather as he holds us in his lap.

The Scriptures are full of images that are very graphic, like those from Leviticus, or those of David and Goliath or David and Bathsheba. But the Scriptures don't just give us images that reflect our experience: they also give us images that re-shape our experiences and present to us a new way of looking at things.

Close your eyes. Now imagine that you are hot and hungry and thirsty. (After having eaten so well that is not easy to do!) But let us imagine it's a hot, dry day in the Middle East. Imagine yourself in a little village. No one else is around because it's so hot; everyone is inside. You come to the centre of the village where you find a well. At the well, there is a woman drawing water. She's the only person around, until someone else comes down a side street and comes up to the well. The stranger, a man, asks the woman for a drink from the water she is drawing from the well.

What happens next? You know what you expect will happen. The woman will give the man a drink. And if she refuses, well, you know what you expect might happen. So far so good. These images are not that difficult for us to imagine, especially if we are from the Middle East or have been there.

But what happens next challenges our expectations. The woman says to the stranger: "Why are you asking me for a drink?" To which the stranger replies: "Ah, woman, if you only knew who I am, you'd ask *me* for a drink." She laughs and says: "Don't be foolish. I'm the only one with a bucket here." The stranger says: "You don't need a bucket for the water that I'll give you. And if I give you water, that water will really quench your thirst. Why, if I give you my water, you'll never have to come back here for more." The woman, a hated

woman in her village because she's taken one man after another from his wife, is now alone at the well at noon, the hottest hour of the day when the pure women of the village are safe in their cool homes. She is alone as she is every day because none of the other women in the town will talk to her. She says to the stranger: "Sure. Give me that water."¹

Open your eyes now. You didn't expect this turn of events, did you, with the stranger asking for water and the woman then asking *him* for water? But, that's just the beginning of a story that contains images that *Abouna Doctor* François wrote about in his doctoral dissertation on the gospel of John. They are images that challenge *our* images about what really matters when you are hungry and thirsty, and they force us ultimately to ask the question: what kind of water is this that the stranger, whose name is Jesus, offers this woman, whose name we never know? what does it look like? how will it satisfy her thirst that keeps her coming back to this hated well all the time? how will it change her life?

The Bible works with the images of our world – water, well, woman, man – but it goes far beyond the images themselves. We start with the images that we know and experience, but then the Bible takes those very images – water, for example – and it moves us into a world that we can barely imagine or expect: living water, never ending, giving new life and freshness and coolness to our parched world.²

In using images that we know, the Bible uses those images to open up a new world, a world that we could otherwise never have imagined. As such, these images that we find in the Bible are like a door into another world, a world that is much larger than the world in which we often think that we know everything there is to know. That world is the world of God's truth, and the door to that world is the Bible.

Why is it important to study the Scriptures? Without the Scriptures, we would not have the door to this world, and thus we would have no sure access to that new world. All that we would have would be this world, and the experiences in this world and the images from the stories that are shaped by this

¹ Cf. John 4:4–15.

² Cf. Ephesians 3:20–21.

world. And for you and me living today in the world in which we live, that means that all that we would have would be the millions of images from the stories that are told to us by people who want to sell us something, whether it be shoes, or cars, or cigarettes, or music, or movies. There's nothing wrong with any of these pictures themselves, but they are only images of things in this world. And you and I are bombarded by them every moment of our lives. But these images and stories will die with this world because what we are being sold will also die with this world. But the images of Scripture open to us a world beyond death. In fact, they will save us from death.

So now I want you to close your eyes one last time. I want you to imagine a door. And then I want you to imagine someone knocking on the door, perhaps with the words, "May I come in?" You recognize that voice, and you go to the door, and you open it. And the Lord comes and sits down right beside you, right here at the supper table where you are sitting now, and He eats with you. And as He eats with you, you feel that you have been made completely new.³ Why study the Scriptures? Because they open the door to a new world, and when we open that door, we find life, new life, true life.⁴

³ Cf. Revelation 3:20.

⁴ The material here is distilled from the presentation to be given at the Mellon Foundation Sawyer Seminar Program at Emory University (Atlanta, GA) on the topic "Visual Exegesis: Images as instruments of scriptural interpretation and hermeneutics," September 14–15, 2013.