

# How Then Shall We Read?

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Contemporary hermeneutics has argued cogently that a reader cannot understand the biblical texts without first having some preliminary pre-understanding. This means that there is no neutral vantage point from which any reader can gain an objective view of things. Hence all reading is perspectival. Furthermore, a reader cannot understand the whole without understanding all its parts; nor can he/she adequately understand the parts without knowing the text in its entirety. Understanding the whole presupposes understanding the parts and understanding the parts also presupposes understanding the whole. This is commonly known as 'hermeneutical circle'.

Since one of the hermeneutical axioms is that all reading is perspectival, one of the most significant ramifications is that, there is no such thing as a right and a wrong reading. Nor is there a (mis)reading. However, I take a different view. There is a 'historical situatedness' of all truth claims. While all reading is perspectival, I maintain that there is such a thing as a right and wrong reading. All we need to do is to go back to the garden of Eden (Gen 3).

In the garden of Eden, the serpent begins with a (mis)reading of God's Word. He said, 'Is it true that God has forbidden you to eat from any tree in the garden? (Gen 3:1; REB). Yet, when we read Gen 2:15 what God actually said was 'You may eat from any tree in the garden...'. Hermeneutically speaking, the serpent employs 'a hermeneutics of doubt' in interpreting God's Word.

When we apply hermeneutics to the biblical texts, many questions arise. Is there a meaning in the text? Is meaning polyvalent? Is there a 'surplus of meaning' (to use Ricoeur's phrase)? Should we leave the text some 'breathing space' (to use Hans Frei's phrase)? Which strategy is best suited for reading biblical texts? Author-centred? Text-centred? or, Reader-centred? How then should we read a text that is historically and culturally conditioned? Since the Bible is a book of the past, can it still be relevant for our technicalised age?

Perhaps a more complex and difficult issue to address for Christians is, what is the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament? Is the relationship between the two Testaments complementary, contradictory or supplementary? Is there an organic unity between the two? If there is, how do we relate the two? Continuity or discontinuity? Can the Old Testament be read in light of the New Testament as the early disciples and Christians did? To put it in another way, is a Christological reading of the Old Testament valid and viable? This is not the platform to discuss all these variegated hermeneutical issues which I have raised. I have sought to do this elsewhere<sup>1</sup>.

In this brief article, I shall be using a story in the book of Acts as illustrative material on how we as contemporary Christians *can* (perhaps should?) read the Scripture. Acts 8: 26-40<sup>2</sup> narrates the story of Philip<sup>3</sup> the evangelist whose journey to the south has been initiated by an angel of the Lord<sup>4</sup> and directed by the Holy Spirit to catch up with the carriage. This leads him to an encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch<sup>5</sup>, a high official<sup>6</sup> of the Kandake<sup>7</sup>, queen of

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<sup>1</sup> See my forthcoming book *Holy Scripture and Human Script* where I will seek to address all the questions raised.

<sup>2</sup> The story of the Ethiopian eunuch and Cornelius are stories of conversions of two gentiles (non Jews and non Proselytes perhaps sympathetic or interested in Judaism). After his baptism, the eunuch sees Philip no more while Cornelius is baptised as one of the group which later forms a church (a cell /satellite group?) in fellowship with the church of Jerusalem. For intertextual echoes, cf. Luke 24.

<sup>3</sup> It is the angel of the Lord who instructs him to go south to the road that leads down from Jerusalem to Gaza. But it is the Holy Spirit who directs him to go and meet the carriage of the Ethiopian eunuch and snatches him away. For parallels, see Elijah and Elisha stories in 1 Kings 18, 2 Kings 2 and 5. Note that 'Philip must go where he is told and there is no supernatural transport', see C.K. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles* (CEC; vol 1; Edinburgh: T & T Clark 1994), p. 422.

<sup>4</sup> Is this a reference to an angel, God or the post-resurrected Christ?

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Deut 23:1 with Isa 56:3-5. Whether the eunuch is impotent from birth or later castrated is not clear. What is clear is that his physical defect and official status are pointed out. See also Matt 19:12. Ethiopia in Luke's geographical location refers to modern day Sudan rather than the Ethiopia of today.

<sup>6</sup> He is described as a man of authority and position.

<sup>7</sup> Kandake is not a personal name but a title. It is a common name given to all queens of Ethiopia like Pharaoh. It was a dynastic name or title of kings of Egypt.

Ethiopia in charge of the treasury<sup>8</sup> (probably his portfolio is that of a Minister of Finance) reading the text of Isaiah chapter 53:7-8<sup>9</sup> aloud on the road to Gaza<sup>10</sup>. Upon the Ethiopian's request, Philip assists him in interpreting the text within the infrastructure of Christology<sup>11</sup>. The Ethiopian then requested for baptism<sup>12</sup>. After his baptism<sup>13</sup>, Philip is transported by the Spirit<sup>14</sup> to Azotus<sup>15</sup> while the man<sup>16</sup> went on his way rejoicing<sup>17</sup>. This is a simple and straightforward story but

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See Gareth L. Reese, *New Testament History: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Acts* (Missouri, Joplin: College Press, 1976), p. 332.

<sup>8</sup> The word for treasure here is *gaza*, which is the same word as the name of the town Gaza. Here there is a play of words. This eunuch who is 'in charge of one treasure, headed toward a town whose name means "treasure" finds a treasure worth more than all the others'. Gareth Reese, *New Testament History*, p. 332. Cf. also Matt 13:44.

<sup>9</sup> Presumably a copy of the Septuagint text in the form of a scroll. Did he purchase it while in Jerusalem or is it his personal copy? The verses quoted are in consonance with the LXX with only small variations. The verses come from a section of Isaiah called 'suffering servant poems'.

<sup>10</sup> Luke tells us that the eunuch is on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. As a eunuch he could not have become a proselyte and since he is not born a Jew, it is best to consider him simply as a God fearing man. See C. K. Barrett, *Acts*, p. 425. Nothing is said of his receiving the Spirit, though this can be assumed. Cf the story of Cornelius Acts 10:1-48.

<sup>11</sup> See also Luke 24:13-35.

<sup>12</sup> 'The Holy Spirit operates through the Word in conversion, not directly upon the heart apart from the Word', says Gareth Reese, *Acts*, p. 334.

<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, some have used this verse to argue for immersion (desert to be understood as unpopulated rather than no water), while others have argued for sprinkling (desert speaks of a dry and arid region with no water). Those who do so are splitting theological hairs and making a doctrinal mountain out of an exegetical molehill and missing the whole point of this passage. Luke's concern is not the mode but the act of baptism.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. 1 Kings 18:12 and 2 Kings 2:11.

<sup>15</sup> Azotus is the Ashdod of the Old Testament, a capital of the Philistines where Dagon is worshipped.

<sup>16</sup> Although we *lack* any evidence of a first century church in Ethiopia (the earliest evidence comes from the fourth century in the Nubian region), it is not unreasonable to assume that he went round evangelising. Somehow the eunuch's conversion is a fulfilment of Psa 68:31 '...Nubia (Ethiopia) will stretch out her hands to God'.

<sup>17</sup> What are some of the important implications for evangelism? One, this whole episode is Spirit directed. Two, God always uses a human instrument in

full of insightful applications. Let me extract from the text some of the more important principles of reading.

The official possesses a copy of the text. The fact that he possesses a copy of the Isaianic scroll is amazing, as it was rare during those days to own copies of such expensive scrolls since only rich people could afford to buy. Today our situation is the opposite. Bibles are cheap and affordable. We have no excuse not to be able to afford one. But possessing a text is different from reading a text, isn't it? Bible illiteracy is high today not because we do not have any text. In fact the irony is that we have too many texts and we do not read them either because of lack of time or interest. My point is that the starting point of any reading begins with us having a text to read<sup>18</sup>.

The official is reading the Text (scroll) of Isaiah 53:7-8 on a hot, arid and humid day while riding in the carriage (we are informed by the text that it is a desert road, verse 26). Possessing a text and reading a text are two different things. Do not underestimate the power of daily devotion or quiet time. It is as vital as fresh air and as valid as your identity card. Many of us may have the text, but do we really *read* the text? One vital lesson to learn is that reading of the text can be done anywhere, any time, and at any place<sup>19</sup>. Surely the

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evangelism rather than direct conversion by the Holy Spirit. Three, angels may point us to go to somebody, but do not have the privilege to share the good news of Christ (Cornelius is another good example. See Acts 10:1-48). Read the whole book on Acts for verification. Four, Philip begins at the point of the Ethiopian's interest before sharing Christ. Five, we need to be sensitive to Spirit's prompting. Six, success in evangelism is being at the right place at the right time. Seven, God's plan knows no racial or geographical boundaries. Finally, any one can be used by God to be sharers of the good news, not necessarily the "qualified", "trained" or "leaders". In this instance it is the evangelist rather than an apostle who is given the privilege to share the Gospel.

<sup>18</sup> The idea of someone having the whole text memorised is an exception to the rule. I recall a quip that says you have a photographic memory. The tragedy is that it has been undeveloped!

<sup>19</sup> 'Let all learn that no situation is an obstacle to reading the word of God: this is something one can do not only when one is alone at home but also in the public square, on a journey, in the company of others, or when engaged in one's occupation' says John Chrysostom quoted by Stephen J. Greene, *The Acts of the Apostles* (The Navarre Bible; Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1992), p. 102.

comforts of modern inventions like air conditions, soundproof rooms, etc. should spur us to be avid readers of the Text. But alas it is not so!

He reads the text aloud. This ancient practice has been neglected and needs to be reintroduced. Reading aloud enables us to hear the words and sounds. It also improves our powers of retention and concentration because we are using our eyes as well as ears. In other words, there is that therapeutic and awesome power of audible reading.

The purpose of reading is to understand. Philip asks, 'Do you understand what you are reading (verse 30)'<sup>20</sup>? There are two obvious implications. One, we read a text in order to understand it. Reading is not meant to be a meaningless activity, as some literary reading theories seem to suggest. Two, there is meaning in the text or intended by the text. If it were not so, why read it?

He demonstrates hermeneutical humility. Firstly, he asks for assistance. The Ethiopian's reply to Philip's question is 'How can I understand without someone to guide me' (verse 31)? He then invites Philip to get in and sit beside him in his carriage. The eunuch's desire to learn and understand the meaning of the text is demonstrated by his willingness and eagerness to have Philip to come up and join him in his carriage. In so doing, the Ethiopian eunuch demonstrates hermeneutical humility. That is what is needed today in reading any biblical text. As readers of the text, we need to be humble enough to know that we need help from one another in understanding God's Word. There are some that have gone farther than us and can teach us much because of their expertise and experiences<sup>21</sup>. None of us possess a monopoly of truth. Our reading can be *adequate* but never *exhaustive*.

Secondly, He asks question(s). 'Who is it that the prophet is speaking about here? Himself or someone else' (verse 34)<sup>22</sup>? Here

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<sup>20</sup> The question is a good example of *paronomasia* the Greek text implies a contrast between reading and understanding.

<sup>21</sup> Other helps include commentaries, concordances, dictionaries, critical aids, etc.

<sup>22</sup> The main point here is not the 'deeds of the Servant but rather the identity of the servant'. Therefore we are misguided if we make too much of what is not included in the quotation from Isaiah. See Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles*,

we see a distinction between sense and referents, meaning and significance<sup>23</sup>. He seems to have understood the words (meaning) but not the referents. Is there a surplus of meaning in the text? Asking questions implies openness. To read the text with understanding, there must be an empathy with or at least openness to the horizon of the text. In so doing, the text has in store for us many surprises. Understanding myself and understanding the text go hand in hand. As I understand myself better I understand the text better. A blind man has difficulty understanding *any* colour, and a deaf man *any* sound<sup>24</sup>. Rather than applying the *hermeneutics* of suspicion, we should apply the *hermeneutics of trust*<sup>25</sup>. In reading the biblical texts we need to ask questions in order to probe/interact with the texts so that our horizon may be challenged, changed or enlarged. The five basic questions we can ask of the text are who, What, When, Why and How?

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p. 298. Those who make too much of Luke 's avoidance of the theology of atonement have fallen into the exegetical pitfall of argument from silence.

<sup>23</sup> This has a very important implication for Bible study groups in Singapore and elsewhere. In my view, it is a wrong approach as well as misleading for a leader in a typical Bible study group to ask each person present, 'what do *you* think this passage *means*?' That leader will get as many answers as there are many people! Since he or she has been taught that being a good leader means to be a facilitator rather than a teacher, his or her task is not to correct anyone. So, everyone goes back happily thinking that *all* the answers (meanings?) given by the people within that group are biblically correct. In other words, the Bible may be interpreted according to the individual's understanding of the text or the way he or she sees fit (cf. 2 Pet 1:20). Most of them do not realise (perhaps the leader too) that what they are giving is not the *meaning* of the passage but the *significance*. This has been my observation over the years. Suffice to say this common phenomenon carries dire consequences. This conceptual confusion should be corrected.

<sup>24</sup> See George Montague, *Understanding the Bible: A Basic Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Philippines: Paulines Publishing House, 1988), p. 5-14.

<sup>25</sup> For this very important discussion see, my monograph, *A Strategy for Reading Biblical Texts* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002).

The ultimate reference point of biblical text is Jesus Christ<sup>26</sup>. Jesus Christ is the hermeneutical key to unlocking and understanding the text. Philip tells the eunuch about the good news, which is Jesus (verse 35). What Philip did is to give a Christological significance to the passage that the eunuch has been reading<sup>27</sup>. The text at hand tells that Christ is the fulfilment of the passage. God has acted in Christ's death and resurrection. Salvation is offered to those who will accept it by faith.

All reading is tied to our social location. In other words what we see depends on where we stand. Philip, a Hellenistic Jew is a Christian. Therefore his interpretation is Christologically situated<sup>28</sup>. There are two important implications. One, all reading is *perspectival*. Another person might have interpreted the text differently. Two, there is such a thing as *wrong* reading and *right* reading<sup>29</sup>. Philip must have believed his reading is the right reading of the text.

The reading of Text leads to a radical transformation. There is power in the text<sup>30</sup>. We read in order to understand the text but the ultimate goal of reading is personal transformation (of our value system and mindset) and spiritual renewal. The eunuch's entire belief system is changed. The fusion of the reader's horizon (in this case the official) and the textual horizon challenges and changes his reading. He is baptized and goes away rejoicing. 'Look, here is water. What is to prevent my being baptized? He told the carriage to

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. 'The Old Testament bears witness (so Luke, like other NT writers, believed) to Jesus Christ, but the witness is intelligible only if one is able to begin with Jesus', in C. K. Barrett, *Acts* p. 428. Cf. also with John 5:39. See also Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ From the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans, 1999).

<sup>27</sup> To the New Testament Christians, the *hermeneutical key* to the Old Testament is none other than Christ. Eg Christ is the rock (1 Cor 10:4); Flood is a type of baptism (1 Peter 3:20-21); manna is the Eucharist (John 6:31-51), etc.

<sup>28</sup> This does not in any way deny that the Old Testament has meaning in and by itself.

<sup>29</sup> See my article on 'Hermeneutical Rules for Reading Bible Texts', *Mission Today* 3/2 (2001), 173-179 and also 'Theological Hermeneutics: A Reading Strategy', 15/1 *Asia Journal of Theology* (2001), p. 2-13.

<sup>30</sup> See my article 'Contemporary Hermeneutics: Bane or Boon?', *Indian Theological Studies* 3/4(2000), p. 245-255.

stop and together they went into the water (verses 36, 38)<sup>31</sup>. When they came up, the Spirit snatched Philip away while he went away rejoicing' (38 -39)<sup>32</sup>.

In any transformative reading, the role of the Holy Spirit<sup>33</sup> in interpretation has important hermeneutical significance<sup>34</sup> which must not be overlooked. Though the medium that is used is a human being, the agency is the Holy Spirit. This can be inferred in Acts 8: 26-40, where the Spirit is mentioned twice. Further, in the earlier verses of 1-25, we hear about the work of the Spirit<sup>35</sup>.

In sum, we must learn to read the text in its entirety. Only by reading the text in its context can we be assured of a right reading. Read the Text, the whole text and nothing but the text. Why? Because no text is an island, entire of itself. Every text is a piece of the context. Any text's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Textuality; And therefore never send to know for whom the text reads, it reads for thee<sup>36</sup>.

There is power in the text. Without the text, anything is permissible, everything is desirable and nothing is constrainable<sup>37</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> Note that verse 37 is either omitted from most translation or footnoted. Most of the scholars are of the opinion that this verse is a later interpolation. It is missing in the earliest and best manuscripts (e.g. *Aleph*, A,B,C,H,P46). It reads, 'Philip said, "If you wholeheartedly believe, it is permitted". He replied, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God"'.  
<sup>32</sup> C. K. Barrett, 'There is no racial qualification for baptism, but right belief is necessary', says C.K. Barrett, *Acts* p. 433. Note the order of progression with reference to the eunuch's baptism: word, faith and baptism.  
<sup>33</sup> 'In Luke's theology angels are God's messengers, but the Spirit is the one who inspires and fills God's people so they may say and do what God wants them to say and do. Pentecost is not about angelophany but rather about an encounter with God's presence directly in Luke's theology' says Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans 1998), p. 294 footnote 57.  
<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, Codex Alexandrinus reads, 'And the Spirit of the Lord fell upon the eunuch, but the angel of the Lord caught Philip away.'  
<sup>35</sup> Read John 16:8-11.  
<sup>36</sup> With apologies to John Donne (1572-1631).  
<sup>37</sup> For more critical discussion on hermeneutics, see my monograph, *A Strategy For Reading Biblical Texts* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002).

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