

Item #59 (On “Getting Inside a Text”)

Once I gave a talk on a text from the New Testament to a parish in the United States, and in answer to a question after I had finished what I had prepared, I mentioned how important it was to “get inside the text”. The small group of parishioners assembled for the talk (it was a snowy night) started laughing at the idea of “getting inside a text”. I waited for the pastor to help me explain what my phrasing meant but he was laughing as well and said he thought the idea was ridiculous. I was and remain perplexed at this response of intelligent people, for it seems to me that there is a real difference between reading William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* perceptively and reading an article on some STEM subject perceptively. There is no “inside” to the latter, but there is to the former.

In what does this “inside” consist? It consists in the realization that one is in touch with something proper to being human, and the more perceptive was the author who wrote, the more perceptive are the spaces “inside” what he or she wrote. Put in other terms, the more perceptive the author was, the greater are the implications of what the text is saying. And the more perceptive the reader is, the more will be the implications perceived.

When it comes to a piece of literature where the implications are truly immeasurable there is nothing to match Sacred Scripture. In other words, there is no other piece of literature where the implications for being human are so immense. One can even say, where the implications are limitless. Provided, of course, that one reads the text with a minimum of perceptivity, a perceptivity made possible by the gift of faith.

In the context of reading the Bible with perceptivity one would do well by asking what “perceptivity” in this context really means. As a believing Catholic (see the “Home” to my website), this means I read the Bible in the context of Tradition, the Tradition in which the Bible has been read in the Catholic Church from the day the Tradition began to be formed. The greater the command I have of this Tradition and the greater the purchase on truth this Tradition has as regards a given text, the greater the implications for being human I will perceive. That is, the more “inside” the text I will be.

No one can say, as far as I can see, that he or she understands the meaning of the Bible completely. Only the Divine Author can say that. But one can have a plausible knowledge of what a given text means. And that is what I aimed at in my book *Hebrews—An Interpretation* featured in my first website, “James Swetnam’s Close Readings”, published as *Subsidia Biblica 47* by the Gregorian & Biblical Press in Rome in 2016. And plausibility is what I aim at in my attempt to understand the Fourth Gospel on Item #1 on this website under the title *John—An Interpretation*. In Item #1 I attempt to “get inside the inspired text”, that is, understand the implications for me and all humans of what has been written.