

Hermeneutics: Contextual Understandings (Deuteronomy 1:10)

The LORD your God hath multiplied you, and, behold, ye *are* this day as the stars of heaven for multitude. (Deuteronomy 1:10)

From a human perspective, there are an untold number of stars in existence: “As the host of heaven cannot be numbered, neither the sand of the sea measured: so will I multiply the seed of David my servant, and the Levites that minister unto me” (Jeremiah 33:22). The Lord Himself knows the exact number of stars in existence: “He telleth the number of the stars; he calleth them all by *their* names” (Psalms 147:4). But, does this promise in Deuteronomy 1:10 regarding the seed of Abraham, literally mean *every* star?

Many people believe that the Bible should be taken literally. In fact, they are encouraged to do so. But what does this really mean to take the Bible literally? Are we to take the Bible literally regardless of genre? What about the genre of poetry? Or, apocalyptic language, which is latent with symbolism? How about figurative language? What about other literary devices that are used throughout the sacred text? Maybe, we should take the Bible literally when the narrative requires such an action. Or, maybe there are other considerations.

I personally do not have a problem with believing that God meant that this particular promise to Abraham is to be literally fulfilled. But do the scriptures regarding the subject at hand support that perspective? Or, is there another way to look at this topic? For example consider the following passages:

And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth went a sharp twoedged sword: and his countenance *was* as the sun shineth in his strength. (Revelation 1:18)

And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars: (Revelation 12:1)

And his tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven, and did cast them to the earth: and the dragon stood before the woman which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her child as soon as it was born. (Revelation 12:4)

These are spots in your feasts of charity, when they feast with you, feeding themselves without fear: clouds *they are* without water, carried about of winds; trees whose fruit withereth, without fruit, twice dead, plucked up by the roots; 13) Raging waves of the sea, foaming out their own shame; wandering stars, to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness for ever. (Jude 1:12-13)

In Genesis 15: 5-6, God told Abraham to look toward heaven, “And he brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be. 6) And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness.”

Adam Clarke says, “Many suppose the expression to be hyperbolic; and others, no friends to revelation, think it a vain empty boast, because the stars, in their apprehension, amount to innumerable millions.”

Can man really know with any degree of certainty how many stars exist? Did Abraham take God literally? Was this promise based on what Abraham could see or what he could imagine?

Clarke also brings up an excellent point by observing this contextual consideration: "Let us consider this subject. How many in number are the stars which appear to the naked eye? for it is by what appears to the naked eye we are to be governed in this business, for God brought Abraham forth abroad, i.e., out of doors, and bade him look towards heaven, not with a telescope, but with his naked eyes . . ."

Clarke also says, "Now I shall beg the objector to come forth abroad, and look up in the brightest and most favorable night, and count the stars . . . The truth is, only about 3,010 stars can be seen by the naked eye in both the northern and southern hemispheres; and the Israelites, independently of women and children, were at the above time more than 600,000."

So was Abraham's faith based on what he could see with his natural eyes or was there some other component in the mix? Such as . . . "By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went . . . 10) For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker *is* God" (Hebrews 11: 8, 10).

Clarke continued: "And suppose we even allow that, from the late discoveries of . . . others with telescopes which have magnified between 35 and 36,000 times, there may be 75 [million] ... stars visible by the help of such instruments, which is the highest calculation ever made, yet still the Divine word stands literally true . . ."

"...Matthew says, in Deuteronomy 1, that the generations from Abraham to Christ were 42; now we find at the second census that the fighting men among the Hebrews amounted to 603,000; and the Israelites, who have never ceased to be a distinct people, have so multiplied as far to exceed the number of all the fixed stars taken together." (Clarke)

Another commentator says, "This was neither an Oriental hyperbole nor a mere empty boast. Abraham was told . . . to look to the stars, and though they 'appear' innumerable, yet those seen by the naked eye amount, in reality, to no more than three thousand ten in both hemispheres. The Israelites already far exceeded that number, being at the last census above six hundred thousand [Numbers 26:51]. It was a seasonable memento, calculated to animate their faith in the accomplishment of other parts of the divine promise." (JFB)

Whether a scriptural passage is to be taken literally or not is a process that must be mastered. Genre, the type of language we are dealing with, and context cannot be ignored by the interpreter. Also, we cannot forget that the Bible is a spiritual book that transcends the natural realm. Faith surpasses the world we can see and transports us beyond what the five senses can convey. Abraham believed God!

There are also contextual considerations: What did Abraham see? What did God want him to see? And with what pair of eyes (glasses) did he see this promise? We have

sports stars and Hollywood stars; that is the world we know. But how did the Jewish Old Testament saints understand the term "stars"?

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. 2) For by it the elders obtained a good report. (Hebrews 11:1-2)

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