

WOULD YOU GIVE YOUR SON A STONE?

GERRIE MALAN



Many are the sermons we have heard on Matthew 7:9-11: “*What man among you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him?*” (Holman Christian Standard Bible).ⁱ

Luke 11:12 also has giving a scorpion when the son asks for an egg. These Scriptures are often used in the Charismatic and Pentecostal church environments when people are prayed for to receive immersion or baptism in the Holy Spirit.

One preacher we were listening to in a televised sermon remarked that he could in any case never understand why any father would want to go outside and pick up a rock to give his son when he asked for bread. To our Western minds the Biblical illustrations can indeed seem strange, if not questionable. However, what we have here is a simple, yet good illustration of why we need to read the Scriptures against the correct background.

Dr. K.C. Pillai was known for his teaching on what is called the orientalism of the Bible. He spent the last twenty years of his life in the USA, where he taught and wrote a number of books. Pillai pointed out that, unlike our bread in the West, bread in the East is round and flat. A number of these get stacked on a flat round stone the same size as the bread. Another stone is placed on top to protect the bread. One of the ingredients in the bread, something similar to our butter (ghee) seeps into the stones with time and they begin to resemble the bread. A small child might easily mistake such a stone for bread. The father, however, knows the difference and would give the child the genuine thing, not the false.

Secondly, there are different kinds of fish in the East, and also a serpent that looks like fish. A child might not know the difference, but father would. Lastly, a certain scorpion in the East is white with a body shaped like an egg. And like an egg, it is yellow and white inside if it is cut open. While an inexperienced child might mistake the scorpion for an egg, father would know the difference.

So we see in this simple illustration that Jesus of Nazareth did not use nonsensical illustrations when he taught the people, but well-known images from their culture. This portion of Scripture is part of the Sermon on the Mount, the kingdom teaching of Jesus. Our heavenly Father will not give his children the false instead of the genuine. I yet have to hear a preacher explain these images as such.

The customs and manners found in the Bible are those of the Eastern or Oriental world and are quite different from those of the Western world. It is not good enough just to study the languages of the Biblical world, but it is essential to also study and understand the customs and manners of the people who originally heard it.

(Bishop Pillai’s works are no longer in print, but you may learn more at <http://www.cortright.org/key6.htm>, or with a wider search of the web).

Some other resources that are useful to provide valuable background knowledge are the following:

- Benner, J.A. *A History Of Hebrew: Its Language And Philosophy*. Ancient Hebrew Research Center. www.ancient-hebrew.org/ahh/ahh.htm. Retrieved 2012/01/26.
- Benner, J.A. 20. *Introduction to Ancient Hebrew*. Ancient Hebrew Research Center. www.ancient-hebrew.org/iah/iah.htm. Retrieved 2013/06/22
- Bivin, D. & Blizzard, R. (revised ed.) 1994. *Understanding The Difficult Words Of Jesus* . Dayton, Ohio: Centre for Judaic Christian Studies.
- Bivin, D. 2005. *New Light on the Difficult Words of Jesus: Insights from His Jewish Context*. Holland, MI: En-Gedi Resource Center.
- Lamsa, George M. 1985. *Idioms of the Bible explained and A Key to the Original Gospels*. San Francisco: Harper.

ⁱ Holman Christian Standard Bible. 2006. *The Holman Illustrated Study Bible*. Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers.