Lesson 5

Look at Your Fish!

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The following article was presented to a class on the study of the Gospels and compositional analysis by a professor at Columbia Theological Seminary in Atlanta, GA, where I was doing graduate study in the NT Gospels. It is a classic in exemplifying the correct way to do research. Whether scientific, historical, literary, or biblical research, the student should first go directly to the original object of the study. If it is a fish, go directly to the fish, not to what others have written about the fish. If it is an ancient composition, go directly to the composition rather than to a commentary on what others have to say about the composition. Professor Jean Rodolphe Agassiz (1807-73) was a Swiss naturalist and an American educator, writer, and founder of the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University. His son, Alexander (1835-1910), continued in his father's stead as a renowned zoologist and geologist, as well as the director and curator of the Harvard Museum. Which of these two is the "Professor Agassiz" of the following story is not known. The source from which the article was originally taken was published in 1880. It has been edited somewhat, but not altered in any way so as to diminish the importance the story places on the researcher's use of his or her powers of observation.

"The Student, The Fish, and Agassiz"

By the Student

It was more than fifteen years ago that I entered the laboratory of Professor Agassiz and told him I had enrolled my name in the scientific school as a student of natural history. He asked me a few questions about my object in coming, my background, what I wished to do with the knowledge I might gain, and if there was any area of study in which I has a

special interest. I replied that while I wished to be well grounded in all departments of zoology, I purposed to devote myself specifically to insects. "When do you wish to begin?" he asked. "Now," I replied. This seemed to please him and with an energetic, "Very well," he pulled down from a shelf a huge jar of specimens in yellow alcohol. "Take this fish," he said, "and look at it; we call it a Haemulon; by and by I will ask you what you have seen." With that he left me, but in a moment returned with explicit instructions as to the care of the object entrusted to me. "No man is fit to be a naturalist," he said, "who does not know how to take care of specimens."

In ten minutes I has seen all that could be seen in that fish, and started in search of the professor, who had, however, left the museum. When I returned my fish was dry all over. I dashed the fluid over the fish as if to resuscitate it and looked with anxiety for the return of a normal appearance. This little excitement over, nothing was to be done but return to a steadfast gaze at my mute companion. Half and hour passed, an hour, another hour; the fish began to look loathsome. I turned it over and around; looked it in the face – ghastly; from behind, beneath, above, sideways, at a three-quarters view – just as ghastly. I was in despair! At an early hour I concluded that lunch was necessary, so with infinite relief, the fish was carefully replaced in the jar, and for an hour I was free.

On my return, I learned that Professor Agassiz had been at the museum, but had gone and would not return for several hours. My fellow students were too busy to be disturbed by continued conversation. Slowly I drew forth that fish, and with a feeling of desperation, again began to look at it. No instruments were allowed me at this stage, only my two hands, my two eyes, and the fish. I pushed my fingers into its mouth to see how sharp its teeth were. I began to count the scales in the different rows until I was convinced that that was nonsense. At last a though struck me – I would draw the fish; and now, to my surprise, I began to discover new features in the creature. Just then Professor Agassiz returned. "That is right," he said; "a pencil is one of the best eyes. I am glad to notice that you keep your specimen wet and your bottle corked." With these encouraging words he added, "Well, what is it like?"

He listened attentively to my brief rehearsal of the structure of parts whose names were still unknown to me: the arched gills and movable

operculum; the pores of the head, fleshly lips, lidless eyes; the lateral line, the fins and forked tail. When I had finished, he waited as if expecting more, and then, with an air of disappointment, said, "You have not looked very carefully; why," he continued, "you haven't seen one of the most conspicuous features of your fish, which is as plainly before your eyes as the fish itself. Look again, look again!" and left me to my misery.

Still more "looking at that fish?" But now I set myself to the task with greater determination and discovered one new thing after another, until I saw how just the professor's criticism had been. The afternoon passed quickly, and when, towards its close, the professor inquired, "Do you see it yet?" "No," I replied, "I am certain I do not, but I see how little I saw before." "That is the next best thing," he said earnestly, "but I won't hear you now; put away your fish and go home; perhaps you will be ready with a better answer in the morning. I will examine you before you look at the fish."

This was very disconcerting. Not only must I think of that fish all night, what this unknown but most visible feature might be, but I must give an account of my findings the first thing the next morning. I had a bad memory; so I walked home by the Charles River in a distracted state, with my perplexity before me.

The cordial greeting from Professor Agassiz the next morning was reassuring. Here was a man who seemed to be as anxious as I that I should see for myself what he saw. "Do you perhaps mean," I asked, "that the fish has symmetrical sides with paired organs?" His thoroughly pleased, "Of course, of course!" repaid the wakeful hours of the previous night. After he had discoursed most enthusiastically, as he always did, upon the importance of this point, I ventured to ask what I should do next. "Oh, look at your fish!" he said, and left me again to my own devices. In a little more than an hour he returned and heard my new catalogue. "That is good, that is good!" he repeated, but that is not all; go on." And so for three long days he placed that fish before my eyes forbidding me to look at anything else or to use any artificial aid. "Look, look!" was his constant instruction.

This was the best entomological lesson I ever had, a lesson whose influence extended to details of every subsequent study; a legacy the

professor left me, as he left to many others, of inestimable value, which we could not buy, and from which we would never part.

Agassiz's training in the method of observing facts and their orderly arrangement was ever accompanied by the urgent exhortation not to be content with them. "Continue to look at your fish until you have seen all that is there to be seen," was his constant instruction. At the end of eight months, it was almost with reluctance that I left these friends and turned to another specialty, but what I gained by this experience has been of greater value than years of later investigation in other areas of research. From Professor Agassiz we have gained one of the most valued lessons of research - the importance of developing one's powers of observation. "Look at your fish!"

Do You See What I See?

The message communicated by this story cannot be overestimated. Most of us do not realize how powerful our minds are and our powers of observation, which set in motion by simply paying the price of time and effort to look at the fish for ourselves into order to see what is there. In the study of Scripture it is likewise a matter of opening the text, reading it and asking questions of the text. The way of doing this is detailed in lesson 9, "The Meaning of It All."

Never underestimate your ability to see things, the more you "look at your fish" to more you will see that is there to be seen. One should be certain that what he or she thinks they are seeing is actually there. People can read into the text what they want to see rather than what is actually there. It may astonish the average Christian to realize that the greatest part of what the average Christian thinks is true doctrine is, in reality, not biblical **doctrine** (i.e. the "teaching" of Scripture), but **dogma** (i.e. that which is declared to be doctrine by an authoritative person or body). The one is called **exegesis** of Scripture (i.e. that which is "taken out" of the Bible from what is within it), the other is **eisegesis** (i.e. that which is "put into" the Bible that comes from outside of it). A good test of what is truly there to be seen is to look for yourself. If you only see what someone

else sees or what someone tells you they see, then someone else is looking at the fish and telling you what they see. If you don't see what they see, there is a very good possibility that it is not there. We all have the tendency to see things in a given text that we take into the text as we enter it. This doesn't make us evil, but it does make us subjective. We should be aware of the fact that we are subjective beings and can subjectivize any subject of consideration. This is done by the best of us. Whether a person is a scholar, and has an alphabet of "letters" following his or her name, that doesn't make what they say they see something that is truly there. If they can't show it to you in a convincing way, then it may not be there.

Remember the story of "The Emperor's New Clothes?" Those who "saw" the emperor's clothes were only seeing what they were being told was there by those who were assumed to have greater insights or "seeing ability" than others. It took a little boy who had no reason to say that he saw something that wasn't there to say what was obvious, "The king has nothing on!" If you don't see what I see, it may be that what I see is not so obvious to others. Beware of those who say that something is there because they see it and those who do not see it are not willing to see what is clearly there. Be independent and honest enough to look at the fish for yourself and be willing to see what is there to be seen and willing to say you don't see what is not there.

If someone says they see something you don't see, why should you believe it is there, if you don't see it? *"Take this fish," he said, "and look at it,"* was the admonition of Professor Agassiz to the student. When he returned to the student, he didn't ask, "What do others say they see?" The question should always be, "What do you see?" It is by your powers of observation that you see what you see. The question is not, "Do you see what I see?" but "Do you see what is there?" This is the lesson of "The Student, the Fish, and Agassiz."

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