

HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE (HERMENEUTICAL PRINCIPLES)

1. Context

Book Context:

Find the Historical and Geographical context by identifying the approximate time frame the book was written. Or attempt to identify the time period of the immediate passage you're studying, if possible. Attempt to identify the certain or probable author of the book and the major purpose for writing the book, if possible. Also, identify any geographical references to specific places and look them up to see if there seems to be any significance to them.

Immediate Context:

Context is the single most important hermeneutical principle because a text without a context is a pretext to believe whatever you want it to mean. Read the passage and the surrounding verses several times; you may even wish to read an entire chapter before and after the chapter you're reading. As you do so, you should be able to answer the following questions:

- a. Who is talking (if a speaker is being quoted) or writing the passage?
- b. Who is the speaker or author talking/writing to?
- c. Is the passage part of a larger discourse? In other words, is it part of a series of parables, a sermon, etc.?
- d. What seems to be the nature of the problem being addressed by the speaker or author? Are there any big questions or issues being discussed in the context?

Quotation Context:

If the passage you're studying is, or includes, a direct quotation of an earlier author, then go to that source and determine the immediate context of the quotation.

[A Study Bible with a preface to each book + a map section in the back are both helpful in this area. Other sources of information include a Bible Atlas, Bible Handbook, or a Bible Commentary.]

Summary of Context:

After you have studied all appropriate contexts, read your data several times and summarize what you discovered. This summary should be one concise paragraph; so practice writing it in order to pack as much of the data into an understandable paragraph. Remember to write it so that you can understand its meaning even at a later time or so that anyone else can understand its meaning.

2. Literary Type

Identifying the Literary Type:

Identify the passage by its literary type--poetry, parable (and related types), prophecy, or ordinary prose (ie., none of the first three categories):

Poetry--with the right Study Bible, poetry will be easy to identify as long as you check first to see that it isn't a quote from some earlier source. Poetry will look like modern poetry does.

Allegory--used only once in Bible, the Greek in Galatians 4:24. Greek word means "to explain one thing by use of another, or different", ie., symbolic or figurative. Example = Galatians 4:21-31; see NKJV, which translates the word as "symbolic."

Proverb, Fable, & Parable--all three have common ingredient of an extended metaphor used in a narrative to teach a spiritual point.

Proverb is a short metaphor. Example = see book of Proverbs; II Peter 2:22.

Fable is technically a narrative in which things in nature are given features which they do not actually possess; but scholars generally also use word "parable" to describe them. Example = Judges 9:7-15.

Parable is said by some scholars to require an introduction with the word "parable" in it or with a simile (eg., "the ... is like unto ...") in order to be a parable. But (1) the same Hebrew word is translated by the KJV as a "parable" or a "proverb" in the Old Testament; (2) although the Greek New Testament uses a different word for "parable" and "proverb", they both essentially mean the same thing--ie., to throw, or place, along the side of something to illustrate its meaning; (3) my NKJV entitles the fable of Judges 9:7-15 "The Parable of the Talking Trees"; (4) see above that the word for "allegory" means same thing; and (5) most scholars acknowledge there is little practical difference among all these terms. Examples = the story of the Sheep & the Goats in Matthew 25 and the Rich Man & Lazarus in Luke 16, as well as parables like those in Matthew 13:24-30.

Prophecy--Prophecies are classified as either general or apocalyptic. Most prophecies are general in nature, like those in most of the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, etc.; they

are given in the context of a specific historical situation, and usually in a straight-forward, literal manner. General prophecies may be conditional, while some may be blended (or telescoped); more information on these sub-types is under "Interpreting the Literary Type" below.

Apocalyptic prophecies, like the Greek word for "apocalyptic" (the book of Revelation in Greek is called "Apocalypse"), which means that which is unveiled or revealed, are characterized by at least three distinguishing features: (1) based directly on visions and/or prophetic dreams, which are referred to in the writing of the prophecy; (2) much obvious symbolism, some of it often bizarre; and (3) portrays the universal struggle between good and evil, and focuses on the final triumph of good over evil in the last days. If these three features are not present in a prophecy, then it is a general prophecy. Examples of apocalyptic prophecies = books of Daniel and Revelation.

Interpreting the Literary Type:

Poetry--Hebrew poetry (ie., poetry among the Hebrews or Jews, not necessarily confined to Hebrew Bible of the Old Testament) may be classified according to type (laments, ie., sorrow; thanksgiving; joy & praise; appeals for help; etc.). Hebrew poetry is usually characterized by parallelism, which means there are certain relationships among the lines--such as the first two lines may express a parallel or contrasting thought; the first and last lines of a verse may express a parallel or contrasting thought and the second and next to last lines also, etc. Thus, the following patterns are common: A:A:B:B; A:B:B:A; A:B:A:B, etc. (The middle pattern is called a chiasm, after the Greek letter "chi.")

Poetry paints word pictures. That means it's more interested in getting a visual and/or audible image across than in being concerned about details. Therefore, do not attempt to interpret every detail in a literal manner; some details are often present only to round off the picture. When you have read the poetry section several times in its context, then write a brief description of its word-picture. Example = Isaiah 34 (especially v. 10 with vv. 11, 13-15); etc.

Parables (including fables, proverbs, & allegories)--Parables, etc. are told to illustrate one or two major spiritual points, which often answer a specific question or solve a specific problem. Read the context and the actual parable several times to get the major point or two. Like Hebrew poetry, treat the details as necessary for rounding out the word-picture and not necessarily as something to interpret (unless an inspired writer does so for us). Then write a brief discussion which identifies the main spiritual point or points. Example = Luke 16:19-31; etc.

General Prophecy--Conditional: a conditional prophecy is one in which its fulfillment depends upon the behavior of those who are the subject of the prophecy. Example = Jonah 3:4. The principle which makes Jonah's prophecy a conditional one is identified in Jeremiah 18:7-10--which describes a type of covenant relationship in that God promises a

blessing or a curse to a group of people, but will reverse Himself depending upon the response of those people. (Thus, the entire range of covenant blessings and curses on Israel makes those prophecies conditional upon the ultimate response of the Hebrew nation as a whole.) When studying a Bible prophecy, identify in writing whether it is general or apocalyptic, and if general, whether or not it is conditional.

General Prophecy--Blended (or Telescoped): a blended, or telescoped, prophecy is one in which a second fulfillment is either stated or implied in the actual prophecy, and which is fulfilled at a far later time (usually end-time) than the original fulfillment. You might think of the telescope feature as the opposite of a flashback. Examples = Isaiah 14:3-23 (king of Babylon to Lucifer to Babylon); Ezekiel 28:11-19 (king of Tyre to Lucifer, according to obvious language); Joel 2:28-32 with Acts 2:17-21 + see also Joel 2:23; 3:1ff for key to interpreting it as blended/telescoped prophecy (implied rather than stated); and II Peter 3:10-13 (cf. vv. 3-4,7) with Revelation 19:11-21:1 (especially 19:21; 20:11; 21:1). Because the nature of a blended, or telescoped, prophecy is usually more complex, I recommend identifying, or at least discussing this feature (if present) only in the final step of your overall conclusions. (Just don't forget to include it in your conclusions if it is present in the prophecy.)

Apocalyptic Prophecy: because apocalyptic prophecy is essentially limited to the books of Daniel and Revelation, and parts of Ezekiel and Zechariah, it's reasonable to expect that there will sometimes be parallels or identical (or similar) symbols in another apocalyptic prophecy than the one you're studying. Probably the same limited use of apocalyptic prophecy in Scripture is the reason why sometimes the same prophecy identifies one or more of its own symbols and/or has a heavenly being to interpret the general direction of the prophecy. In any case, allow Scripture to interpret itself as elsewhere without reading popular concepts, modern meanings of names, etc. into the prophecy. And please note that apocalyptic prophecies are so detailed in their specifications and so certain as to their outcome (see Revelation 1:1; 22:6, 18-19) that none of them can be conditional or blended/telescoped in nature.

3. Key Word Study

Key Word List:

After you have determined the full context and type (and sub-type) of literature, you need to make a list of all the key words and phrases, including those which are unknown to you, which are used in the King James' Version.

Dictionary Definition:

Look each one up in *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*. From the Main Concordance part of *Strong's*, find each English key word (and phrase) used in the KJV according to

alphabetical order; a reference to a specific text is given at the left; a short phrase or clause with the word in it will be written next to the text reference. Then look for a code number to the right of that phrase or clause. If the reference is in the Old Testament, go to the Hebrew and Chaldee Dictionary in the back of *Strong's*; if it's in the New Testament, go to the Greek Dictionary of the New Testament in the back of *Strong's*.

In either case, look up the code number in the appropriate Dictionary. When you find it, there will be, among other things, information on the origin or derivation of the word (if known, or if a compound word) and its basic meaning. Don't forget that if the word has any information on its origin or derivation, this may lead you to a more complete understanding of the word. After a colon (:), *Strong's* lists any and all translations of that word used in the KJV of the Bible. From this information you can identify every single instance of that Hebrew (or Aramaic) or Greek word in the Bible.

Write down all relevant information that you find from *Strong's* at this point. Then identify in writing whether the word is used in your passage in a literal or symbolic sense. Three key questions should be asked and answered in order to determine whether a word is being used literally or symbolically:

- a. Is it possible (ie., common sense) to interpret it in a literal way? (Naturally, you should assume that miracles are possible.)
- b. Is the immediate context filled with obvious symbolic language?
- c. Would interpreting it literally contradict anything in the Bible, including the immediate context?

Examples = Luke 16:22-23 (Abraham's bosom?), v. 24 (drop of water comforts someone in hell-fire?); Revelation 17:1 (literal harlot?), cf. vv. 5 & 18; 17:3 & 7 (10 horns?), cf. v. 16.

Literal Usage Meaning:

After you have completed your Key Word List and Dictionary Definition work, and identified each word as to whether it is used literally or symbolically, then you are ready to determine the usage meaning of each word or phrase. For each word or phrase that's used in a literal sense in your passage, look up and read every occurrence of that Hebrew (or Aramaic) or Greek word or phrase only when it is used literally elsewhere; the context of each text will tell you that just as it did for the main passage you're studying. (Be certain it is every literal use of the word in the Biblical language, not just the one English word used in the KJV.) Then list each literal reference with a brief note about how it was used (ie., what it meant). This will give you a very good sense of the usage meaning of that word or phrase, which is even more important than the dictionary meaning. If the same Hebrew (or Aramaic) or Greek word is used several times by the

same Bible author or in the very same book in which the passage you're studying is in, pay even more attention to how he uses that key word. Of course, usage meaning must be consistent with the immediate context of the passage. In addition to this, check your Bible's cross-reference system to discover whether other manuscript evidence points to a different Hebrew or Greek word being used in the original text instead of the one in the text you're using. On rare occasions this might be the answer to a perplexing dilemma of the context. Example = Titus 2:14 ("peculiar").

Symbolic Usage Meaning:

For each word or phrase which is not used literally in the main passage you're studying, look up and read every occurrence of that Biblical word or phrase only when it is used symbolically elsewhere. For symbolic usage meanings, use *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance* to identify the normal Biblical word in the other Testament too--in other words, if your main passage is in the New Testament (Greek), then use the Main Concordance and then the Hebrew and Chaldee Dictionary in *Strong's* to determine the normal Hebrew (or Aramaic) word with the same essential dictionary definition as that of the Greek word in the New Testament; and vice versa if your main passage is located in the Old Testament. Then list each symbolic reference with a brief note about how it was used (ie., what it meant). Follow all other advice given in the paragraph above (entitled "Literal Usage Meaning"). Examples = Revelation 17:1 (literal waters?), cf. 17:15; Revelation 17:9-10 (literal 7 heads?), cf. 7 mountains, not hills + 7 kings--see Daniel 2:35,44; Isaiah 2:2-3; Jeremiah 51:25.

Typological Meaning:

If you find that a proper noun--such as the name of a specific person, ethnic group of people, or place (city, nation, river, mountain, etc.)--is used with a symbolic meaning, then write that key word down in a separate list from the other symbolically used key words. In such cases, the key word has a typological meaning. Typology exists when someone or something else earlier in Scripture is a type of someone or something later in Scripture; in other words, when an earlier reference prefigures what was future in its day. The type is the original use, and the later usage is called the antitype. It is symbolic, but it's a special type of symbolism called typology. Sometimes it is not a proper noun, although in such cases the typology usually stands out as easily recognizable to a person well-read in the Bible, even sometimes being stated in the same passage.

After listing any key words with certain or probable typological meaning, use *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance* to look up each occurrence of that word in both Testaments (ie., including the normal word used in the opposite Testament with the same essential meaning as that used in the passage you're studying). Then list each reference with a brief note about the characteristics and events associated with it in that passage. This step will provide you with the basic elements associated with the type, which then may appropriately be applied--at the spiritual level--to the antitype. In some cases, you may

have to look for other clues in the context of the passage (and book) you're studying and in general history in order to specifically define the antitype.

Examples = John 1:29 (sacrificial lambs were types of Christ), cf. numerous Old Testament passages, especially in Exodus and Leviticus; Hebrews 9:8-9 (earthly tabernacle was type of the heavenly sanctuary), cf. 9:2; Revelation 14:8; 16:19; 17:5; 18:2 et.al. (literal Babylon was a type of end-time Babylon), cf. Isaiah 14:4,21-24; Jeremiah 50:39-40 (in context); 51:29,37,43,62-64 + history; Revelation 17:1-5 (note also "mystery"),18; Malachi 4:5 (Elijah was a type of John the Baptist), cf. Matthew 11:10-11,14; 17:10-13 [NOTES: (1) This latter is not really a blended/telescoped prophecy because any implication of a second fulfillment is not clearly present (although indirectly seen in Malachi 3:1 with 4:5-6); and (2) note that Malachi 4:5 implies yet another fulfillment shortly before the end-time.]

[Other sources of information for key word (phrase) studies include a Bible Dictionary, Bible Commentary, or specialized Hebrew and Greek lexicons (ie., dictionaries).]

4. Literary Structure

Parallel Passages:

A parallel passage exists when one or more other Biblical passages cover essentially the same ground in the same or very similar way as the one you're studying. There must be a fairly close parallel in order to classify it as a parallel passage; look for the same or similar key words and/or phrases and organization as well as the same topic. The easiest way to discover a parallel passage is to use your Study Bible's cross-reference system and look up every Biblical reference listed for your verse or verses. If that search proves in vain, then look up all the passages which contain one of the key words in the passage you're studying; if none of those proves to be a parallel passage, then none exists for that text.

If you find one or more parallel passages, then compare the two or more parallel passages with each other to look for slightly different words or phraseology--something which may further explain the meaning of a symbol or a literal word/phrase. This is especially helpful, then, in further refining your key word study. Just write a list of key words and phrases from each parallel passage so you can compare or contrast them more easily. Example = Matthew 24:15 ("abomination of desolation") with Mark 13:14 (same as Matthew) and Luke 21:20 ("Jerusalem compassed with armies"), cf. several verses after these verses in each parallel passage.

Poetry:

When you have identified a passage as Hebrew poetry and completed the key word study

(and context, of course), check the literary structure of the poetry for clues which may further refine the meanings of key words--never forgetting that some words and phrases may be present as details simply to round out the word-picture. It is helpful to diagram the entire poem on paper in order to indicate the parallelisms present in it.

Example = Job 4:17:

A Shall mortal man be more just than God?

A¹ Shall a man be more pure than his maker?

The above diagram indicates that both lines of this Hebrew poem present parallel thoughts to each other; the flow of the phraseology makes that clear to a person's common sense. Such a parallelism also demonstrates that the Hebrew word for "just" may (because it does here) also contain the idea of purifying or cleansing. NOTE: This is helpful in the controversy about the same Hebrew word translated as "cleansed" in the KJV of Daniel 8:14; in other words, "cleansed" may indeed be a correct translation there if the context justifies it (which it does via "the sanctuary shall be ...).

Prose:

Even if the passage you're studying is in prose (ie., non-poetry), look for parallels, contrasts, lists, etc.--anything which would help you organize the passage for clearer study. Of course, most prose passages do not contain special organizational features like these; but sometimes they exist and are quite helpful in further refining the meaning of a key word or phrase. The advanced student of God's Word will also look for parallels and contrasts regarding verb tenses, singular versus plural nouns or pronouns, spatial dimensions, etc.

Example = Acts 2:42:

A And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine

B And fellowship,

B¹ And in breaking of bread,

A¹ And in prayers.

The above literary structure is an example of a chiasm (named after the Greek letter of the alphabet known as "chi"), characterized by a parallelism of the first and last elements in a passage, the second and next to last being parallel to each other, etc. This chiasm demonstrates that since "doctrine" and "prayers" are obviously spiritual activity, and "fellowship" is social activity, then the "breaking of bread" is also social activity--that of socially eating together. This refutes a commonly held viewpoint which interprets every expression of "breaking of bread" in the New Testament, or at least in the book of Acts, as the Christian communion service (ie., Lord's Supper).

Example = Galatians 4:21-31: From this passage, you should be able to create two separate lists, one associated with the old covenant (implied) and the other with the new covenant (implied). This will sort the verses out as they go back and forth, and make it easier to interpret the allegory.

Example = Daniel 7:2-14:

A Earth--verses 2-8

B Heaven--verses 9-10

A¹ Earth--verses 11-12

B¹ Heaven--verses 13-14

The above diagram showing spatial dimensions as they changed during Daniel's vision provides greater clarity when identifying which verse is located in which spatial dimension; it also makes it clear that a judgment is to occur in heaven before the return of the Son of Man (ie., Christ) to earth to claim His people for His kingdom.

Example = Daniel 8:2-14:

A Horizontal motion--verses 2-9

B Vertical motion upward--verse 10a

C Vertical motion downward--verse 10b

B¹ Vertical motion upward--verse 11a

C¹ Vertical motion downward--verses 11b-12b

A¹ Horizontal motion (implied)--verses 12c-14

The above diagram of the literary structure of Daniel's vision in chapter 8 strongly suggests that the "prince of the host" (KJV) is Jesus Christ Himself in the role of High Priest--cf. verse 25 ("Prince of princes" + "broken without hand"), sanctuary language all over the prophecy, etc.--and that this is a prophecy about a future (to Daniel's day) attack on the place, or purpose, of His High Priestly ministry in the Heavenly Sanctuary (cf. Hebrews 7-9).

5. Conclusions

Conclusions:

After you have completed work on the Context, Literary Type, Key Word Study, and Literary Structure, reread a few times all the evidence you have assembled. Be certain that you give proper weight to the context, literary type, and literary structure before you reach your conclusions. Then after careful, prayerful thought, write your conclusions down in one paragraph. Remember that you do not need to repeat all the evidence during

this process, but make general references to the kinds of evidence which led you to each of your conclusions.

Revised Conclusions:

After you have written your conclusions, spend a few days without looking at your study sheets. Then reread them all again a few times and attempt to find weaknesses in your evidence collection and conclusions. Play the role of a critic and try to shoot holes in your arguments. Give photocopies of your worksheets to a Bible scholar you trust and ask him/her to do the same thing for you. Obviously, the more you read and study the Bible and other authors of theology, the easier this process will be. Pray and think several more days about the matter, especially after getting feedback from your Bible scholar friend. Make any changes in your interpretation of the evidence or additions to your evidence which you may have overlooked in order to answer any expected arguments from real critics. Finally, after all this critical reexamination of the evidence and conclusions, and you believe that you have accurate responses to any critics of your position, write your revised conclusions, if any, in one new paragraph.

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