

UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

Three Steps to Enrich and
Deepen Your Knowledge of
the Scriptures

R. Herbert



A Tactical Belief Book

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Deepen Your Knowledge
of the Scriptures**

By R. Herbert

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INTRODUCTION:

The Book We Read but Don't Always Understand

The Bible is the world's all-time best-selling book. Every year since sales figures were first recorded, more Bibles have been printed and sold or given away than any other published work. An astonishing 20 million printed Bibles are distributed each year in the United States alone – and this does not count the millions of electronic copies of the Scriptures that are also distributed. Many Christians own or read more than one translation of the Bible, and there are countless books discussing virtually every chapter in the Old and New Testament alike.

Yet despite all the Bibles in existence and all the books about the Bible, most Christians will admit that the Bible contains a great many things they do not understand. Not only are there occasional mysterious prophecies that may seem impossible to comprehend, but there are hundreds, in fact thousands, of other verses that may seem confusing or difficult to understand when we focus on them. This has led to the Bible sometimes being called “the most-read and least-understood of all books.”

Christians understand that we must approach the Bible with respect for what it is – the word of God – and that ultimately we will only understand its truths to the degree that we have that kind of respect (Isaiah 66:2). We also understand that there is a spiritual dimension to much of what the Bible teaches, and we must be willing to prayerfully ask for guidance in understanding its message (Luke 24:44-45; 1 Corinthians 2:14).

But even when we try to apply a right attitude and approach to our personal study of the Bible, we may still find that there are many verses or whole passages we simply do not understand – no matter how intently we read them or think about them.

Admitting the Problem

Admitting that we do not understand all of the word of God does not necessarily reflect some failure on our part. We should always remember that no less a Christian than the apostle Peter wrote about his fellow-apostle Paul's writings that "His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction" (2 Peter 3:16). Notice that Peter not only admitted there were difficult things to understand in the writings of Paul, but also clearly implied that there were things in "the other Scriptures" – the rest of the Bible – that people did not understand.

The seeming difficulty of many biblical verses leads a great many Christians to often skip and skim when reading the Bible – to quickly move through verses they do not understand and to only settle on and think about those verses they recognize and feel they understand clearly.

Yet if we believe the Bible to be the word of God, we must remember that it tells us "All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16 CSB). We may know this verse and believe it, but we do not always put it into practice in accepting that all scriptures have the potential to be understood and to help us in some way. In our own study it is usually easier to concentrate on those scriptures we feel comfortable with. But if we do this, there will always be a great number of biblical verses that we will not understand – and perhaps worse, may misunderstand to our own hurt or that of others.

Finding Answers

In the long run we will grow far more in our understanding and appreciation for God's word if we can learn how to unlock those verses that otherwise would be closed to us – and it is possible to read and understand most of what the Bible says if we can learn to

approach it in the right way and, when needed, with the help of what we might call “the cumulative experience of the Christian community.”

The Bible itself gives us a wonderful example of this fact. The book of Acts (8:26-40) tells how the early Christian leader, Philip, met a high-ranking government official from Ethiopia who was reading the Book of Isaiah. The Ethiopian was clearly a devout believer who knew a great deal about what the Hebrew Scriptures said. His understanding had led him to travel many hundreds of miles to attend a great religious festival in Jerusalem, yet he admitted to Philip that he was unsure of the meaning of part of what he read: “About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” (Acts 8:34).

Fortunately for the Ethiopian, an explanation of the verses he found difficult to understand was given by Philip, who was sitting next to him. Although we do not always have such help available, there are a number of principles we can learn that can effectively help us to understand the Bible more fully. That is the purpose of this book: to help you increase your comprehension of the Bible by helping you see how to unlock many of the things it says that may not be clear to you – and perhaps, in some cases, to better understand verses that you thought you understood!

Three Steps to Understanding the Scriptures

The book takes you through three “steps” or levels that reveal the Bible’s meaning to us – the words themselves, the context, and the background – the three aspects of every biblical verse that we may need to utilize to enable us to understand what we read.

The three steps involve respectively looking for and finding the intended scriptural meaning within the specific text we are studying, making proper connections with similar material within the Bible itself, and looking, when necessary, at the Bible’s setting – its wider archeological, historical, and cultural background.

In many cases, we only need to take the first step – that of looking more closely at the words themselves – in order to understand a given biblical passage. But when the meaning of what we read is not clear at that level, we need to then progress to the second or even third steps of context and background.

Whether we are relatively new to Bible study or are experienced students of the word of God, this three-step process can be followed when necessary in order to understand areas of the Bible that are not clear to us. It can also be used when desired to increase our comprehension of scriptures that may be clear, but that we want to understand and appreciate more fully. In either case, these three steps can help us avoid misunderstandings and can enrich and deepen our right understanding of the Scriptures.

**STEP ONE:
LOOKING AT
THE TEXT**

1. THE MEANINGS OF WORDS

Where does understanding the Bible begin? Assuming we have the right attitude and approach to the word of God, the first step to better understanding the Scriptures involves learning to look more closely and clearly at every section of biblical text that we read.

This is not only because the message of the Bible resides in its words, of course, but also because finding the meaning of a biblical statement in the text itself, when it is possible, is always preferable to trying to establish its meaning through comparisons with other verses or background information that we are able to bring to bear on the words we are trying to understand.

Understanding what the Bible is saying, at the level of the text itself, is largely dependent on learning to recognize and understand the three types of language we may encounter in reading the Scriptures – the literal, figurative, and symbolic language used by the biblical writers – and interpreting them correctly.

Over half the verses in the Bible can be understood at the literal level, and language used literally is, of course, usually the easiest type of language to understand. That does not mean that every statement meant to be taken literally is simple to comprehend, however. Even a seemingly straightforward text such as Jesus' words "when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8) has different possible meanings and needs to be looked at closely if we are to understand it properly. There are also times when we must consider a statement carefully to determine if it is to be taken literally or not – especially in scriptures that may have doctrinal importance. The next chapter looks at some of these situations and at ways we can better understand many literal statements.

Figurative language is the next most common type of language used in the Bible. It is frequently found in both the Old and New Testaments, and its importance for understanding the Bible cannot be overestimated. Take a small example. In his third epistle, the

apostle John wrote: “Beloved, I wish *above all things* that you may prosper and be in health, even as your soul prospers” (3 John 1:2 KJ2K, emphasis added). This verse is often misunderstood to mean that prosperity and physical health are to be highly sought in the Christian life and are of the greatest importance. In reality “I wish above all things that you may prosper and be in health” is just a common letter opening expression of John’s day, just as we might say something like “I hope this finds all well with you” in writing a letter today. The chapter on the use of figurative language shows how we can better recognize and understand language of this type.

Symbolic language can sometimes be simple to understand – as in the lover’s words “Your eyes behind your veil are doves. Your hair is like a flock of goats descending from the hills of Gilead” (Song of Solomon 4:1). But in other cases it may involve complex symbols set in mysterious stories and prophecies and may be the hardest to understand of the different kinds of language used in the Bible. Nevertheless, symbolic language may also be the most rewarding when we do understand it. In the chapter dedicated to this type of language, we will look at the different ways in which the Bible uses symbolism to teach its lessons, ranging from individual words and phrases to stories and accounts that have much deeper meaning than the literally understood words might suggest.

As we will see, coming to know the ways in which the Scriptures use literal, figurative, and symbolic language can make a tremendous difference in our overall understanding of the text of the Bible.

2. LITERAL LANGUAGE

The first rule of dealing with a Bible text is a very simple one – that we *presume the words of any biblical verse or passage we read should be understood in their normal “literal” way unless we have reason to look for other, deeper levels of meaning.* This means that we always read a biblical text as we would any other regular document such as a newspaper or a book about plants or music or any other topic – and that we accept the normal everyday meaning of what is said unless we see some reason that the words may have been used figuratively or symbolically.

Although this first rule may seem obvious, the centuries since the Bible was written have seen numberless cases of people misinterpreting biblical texts because they presumed there was some deeper symbolic, theological, or spiritual meaning involved in them rather than the plain meaning of what the text said.

On the other hand, accepting what the Bible says at face value does not always work either, and many people have hurt themselves or others unnecessarily by taking biblical statements literally that should not have been understood that way. We need to know when to accept a literal understanding of what we read and when to move on to other levels of meaning.

When to Take the Bible Literally

Practically speaking, if we read in the Bible about a storm or a sea, about a loaf of bread or a donkey, or about anything at all, we should begin by presuming this is all that is meant. Only when that approach gives a puzzling or difficult result should we begin to look for other ways to understand the words we read. When Jesus said, “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35), clearly we have to look at a symbolic meaning for this statement. But on those occasions when we are told that Jesus “broke bread” or talked about a woman

baking bread, and in dozens of other similar examples, a plain, literal meaning of “bread” should be just as obvious.

We should always remember that despite all its poetry, imagery, and symbolism, the Bible contains far more simple text with “literal” significance than any other kind of meaning. People sometimes will say “You don’t take the Bible literally, do you?” and a correct answer to that question could be “Yes, when it is not speaking symbolically or figuratively, I believe the Bible is speaking literally!”

But that doesn’t mean we get to pick and choose what we want to accept as literal. Many non-Christians and even some who feel they are Christians attempt to do this by reading “acceptable” things literally and less appealing or more difficult statements as being figurative or symbolic. In this way, some wrongly read the Bible by not accepting events such as the virgin birth, miracles, or the resurrection of Jesus literally. It is better to presume that a biblical statement is to be understood literally if:

1. *The statement does not lead to an unlikely or physically impossible conclusion where a miracle is not specifically stated.* For example, the Gospel of John ends with the statement that if all the deeds Jesus performed during his earthly ministry were fully recorded, the whole world could not hold the books that would be necessary to include them (John 21:25). Clearly, statements like this are not meant to be taken literally.

2. *The statement does not contradict other information we have and about which we are sure.* Unless we have other information that clearly contradicts a literal interpretation of something we read in the Scriptures, we can usually presume that what we are reading is meant to be taken literally. Sometimes, the apparent contradiction can actually be explained (see our free book *Scriptures in Question*), and in other cases it may be clear that the statement we are reading is meant as a symbolic one (next point), but in all other cases we should presume literality.

3. *The statement is not part of a clearly symbolic section of the Scripture.* There are exceptions to this principle, however. Sometimes when we read prophetic sections of scripture, for example, we can create problems of understanding and interpretation by assuming that everything said is to be taken literally – or symbolically. It may be that we need to look carefully at what is said on a verse by verse or even phrase by phrase basis.

So the basic principle of presuming a literal meaning for biblical statements – unless there is indication not to do so – does not mean that we should “shut down” our thinking processes as we read or fail to be on the lookout for multiple possibilities in what is said. Understanding words literally can often still give us a range of possible meanings to consider, as we see in the following case study.

Case Study: The Meanings of “Firstborn”

The Bible does not use words only literally or symbolically – often the same words are used in both ways. Take, for example, the use of the term “firstborn.” The biblical designation of “firstborn” often means the literal “one born first,” but just as often it has different connotations, and knowing those meanings can help us to better understand a number of scriptures.

In ancient Israel, as in much of the ancient Near East, the firstborn son inherited his father’s responsibilities as head of the family (Genesis 27), so we read in the Old Testament that he normally received a special – double – inheritance (Deuteronomy 21:17). We see this fact in the stories of the patriarchs, where we also see that being the “firstborn” was a privilege that could sometimes actually be bestowed on a younger son who was not the literal firstborn at all. When we read the stories of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, we see that “firstborn” privilege was frequently not based on literal birth order, but on selection.

But whether literally firstborn or chosen as such, the holder of the firstborn birthright held a special place in biblical society. After

the Passover slaying of the Egyptian firstborn and the Exodus from Egypt, every firstborn Israelite male was dedicated to God's service. This obligation was later transferred to the Levites (Numbers 8:14-19), but the significance of the special relationship between God and the firstborn continued, as we see in the fact that the nation of Israel as a whole was called God's firstborn (Exodus 4:22-23; Jeremiah 31:9; etc.). This fact signified Israel's special standing among the nations and also the priestly responsibility of Israel to be a "light" to the Gentile nations around them.

Thus, when Jesus Christ is called the "firstborn" in the New Testament, the word can mean several things. The term applies both to his literal position as firstborn of God: "when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him" (Hebrews 1:6); firstborn from the dead: "the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead" (Colossians 1:18); and the One who is supreme: "The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation" (Colossians 1:15).

We see, too, how these meanings flow over into the New Testament's description of Christians as being "firstborn." Our relationship with Christ and our identification with him means that we too have become firstborn, like the nation of physical Israel, but even more so: "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters" (Romans 8:29). That is why the book of Hebrews refers to Christians as "the church of the firstborn" (Hebrews 12:23).

So, the term "firstborn" in the Scriptures can mean much more than simply "the one born first." It may mean that, but it may also mean the one to whom the birthright responsibility was given.

In our own study we can navigate these different meanings by simply presuming a term is used literally unless that does not fit what is being said. At that point we can move on to figures of speech and other metaphorical and symbolic levels of meaning.

3. FIGURES OF SPEECH

Once we have looked at what a text says literally, if that does not give us a clear and understandable meaning, we can move on, if necessary, to what it might mean *figuratively*.

All languages, including those used in writing the Bible, utilize figures of speech. They are often used in Scripture for emphasis or simply because they are a common way of using language in a non-literal yet clear manner. An example would be Jesus' words that John the Baptist "came neither eating nor drinking" (Matthew 11:18). Obviously, John had to eat and drink to stay alive, but Jesus was speaking figuratively, using an expression outside its normal literal meaning – in this case to indicate that John declined invitations to eat and drink in banquets and other social settings. Usually such figurative use of language is easy to spot, but on occasion we must think about it – just as the disciples sometimes thought that Jesus was speaking literally when he was not (Matthew 19:25; etc.).

Many times it is left to us as readers of the Scriptures to see that a figure of speech is being used, and we need to be able to recognize them when we do encounter them. The following ten kinds of figurative language, each with its technical name and an example from the Old Testament and New Testament, are the most common kinds of figures of speech that it is helpful to know.

Ten Types of Figurative Language Found in the Bible

1. Contrast (Antithesis): A direct contrast in which two things are set in opposition to each other.

OT: "We look for light, but all is darkness" (Isaiah. 59:9).

NT: "God is light, in him there is no darkness" (1 John 1:5).

2. Substitution (Euphemism): The substitution of a more polite or gentle word for a potentially inappropriate one.

OT: “Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain” (Genesis 4:1 ESV).

NT: “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up” (John 11:11).

3. Combination (Hendiadys): The combination of two or three words to express the same meaning.

OT: “in darkness and the deepest gloom” (Psalm 107:10 NLT).

NT: “to the glory and praise of God” (Philippians 1:11).

4. Exaggeration (Hyperbole): An exaggeration for effect intended to make or reinforce a point.

OT: “The cities are great, and walled up to heaven” (Deuteronomy 1:28 KJ2K).

NT: “You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel” (Matthew 23:24).

5. Sarcasm (Irony): Stating one thing while actually meaning the opposite.

OT: “Doubtless you are the only people who matter, and wisdom will die with you!” (Job 12:2).

NT: “You have begun to reign as kings without us” (1 Corinthians 4:8 CSB).

6. Analogy (Metaphor): One thing described in terms of another thing.

OT: “The Lord is my shepherd” (Psalms 23:1).

NT: “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35).

7. Substitution (Metonymy): The substitution of one thing for another.

OT: “My shield is God Most High” (Psalm 7:10).

NT: “you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” (Ephesians 2:11).

8. Embodiment (Personification): The representation of a group, object, or concept as if it were a person or living thing.

OT: “Wisdom calls aloud in the street” (Proverbs 1:21 CSB).

NT: “the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth” (Romans 8:22).

9. Comparison (Simile): A comparison made by using the words “like” or “as.”

OT: “The mountains leaped like rams” (Psalm 114:4).

NT: “You are like whitewashed tombs” (Matthew 23:27).

10. Part for the Whole (Synecdoche): a figure of speech in which a part represents the whole or vice versa.

OT: “one who has clean hands and a pure heart” (Psalm 24:4).

NT: “give us this day our daily bread” (Matthew 6:11 ESV).

It is vital to effective understanding of the Bible that we learn to recognize figures of speech like these, and that we do not read them literally. We might not interpret a parable or symbolic story literally, but we can easily make the mistake of reading smaller passages and expressions as if they were to be understood literally when, in fact, they might not be literally intended at all.

If we learn to recognize figures of speech, we will not be confused, for example, by scriptures such as Psalm 1:1 “Blessed is he who does not stand in the way of sinners” (which does not mean to get out of the way of those trying to sin!). Or, more importantly, “If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out” (Matthew 5:29 CSB), and “Everything is possible for one who believes” (Mark 9:23), which are both examples of exaggeration for effect.

One area where language is often used figuratively in the Bible, in many of the different forms we have looked at in this chapter, is that of idioms – expressions that have a different overall meaning from those of the individual words that compose them. In the following case study, we will see how important recognizing idioms can sometimes be for understanding of what we read in the Bible.

Case Study: “The Length of Two Noses” and Other Idioms

We take idioms for granted in our own language. When someone says, “It’s raining cats and dogs,” we don’t expect to see falling animals – we understand that words used in idioms don’t have their usual individual meanings and that the expression has taken on a new significance altogether. So we understand the idiom to “see the light” as meaning simply to “understand,” or the expression to be “in hot water” to mean “in trouble.”

This use of idioms is common in many languages, and the Old Testament is particularly rich in this regard. A great many Hebrew idioms have to do with body parts – especially the face, hands and feet – and these are often “guessable” in context even if they sound strange to our ears – as when we read “his face fell” (as in Genesis 4:5 ESV), and we sense the meaning is that the individual was sad. Similarly, in the Old Testament to have “clean hands” (as in Psalm 24:4) is to act purely, and to have “closed hands” (for example Deuteronomy 15:7 in many versions) is to act selfishly.

These examples may make sense to us, but at other times it is not quite so easy to see the meaning of underlying Hebrew expressions. The Hebrew idiom “his nose burned” (as in Genesis 30:2) means he was furious, and the expression “the length of two noses” means to be “patient” (as in Exodus 34:6 and elsewhere). Fortunately, translators usually make such expressions understandable for us, and the more modern the translation, the more idioms tend to be translated with modern expressions rather than literally.

An example is found in the Hebrew expression “their ears are uncircumcised,” which is translated literally in the KJV and ESV (as in Jeremiah 6:10), but the NIV and other versions translate the expression’s meaning as “their ears are closed.”

This kind of meaning-for-meaning translation is often particularly important because idioms can confuse us even though we may think we understand them. We may guess that in Hebrew the idiom “hearts and kidneys” (KJV “hearts and reins”) – as in Psalm 7:9 – means what we would call our “thoughts and

emotions;” but even knowing that “hearts” means “thoughts,” we may miss the fact that the Hebrew expression “heart lifted up” does not always mean to be happy (as in 2 Chronicles 17:6), but can also mean to be prideful (as in Deuteronomy 8:11-14).

Again, many modern translations help us make sense of idioms such as the ones we have looked at, but they will also sometimes leave idioms untranslated. This is particularly true in the New Testament – and especially in the Gospel of Matthew which was likely originally written in Hebrew. We see this throughout Matthew when he speaks of the “kingdom of heaven,” as opposed to the “kingdom of God,” as we find in the other Gospels. In Hebrew, “heaven” was used idiomatically for “God,” so a true meaning-to-meaning translation would render “kingdom of heaven” as “kingdom of God” in Matthew, also.

Consider another example from Matthew. In Matthew 19:24 we read the famous words of Jesus: “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” Most English translations from the King James Version to the New International Version translate this verse in this way, but for centuries commentators have disagreed on the origin for the phrase “a camel to go through the eye of a needle.” Some have speculated that the expression is based on a small “needle gate” next to a larger gate in Jerusalem – the smaller gate being left open at night so that a camel, kneeling down and without its rider, could just pass through.

Attractive as this explanation might sound, there is no proof of it and no historical evidence of any such gate. But the expression is based on a known idiom. The Hebrew word *gemala* translated “camel” does often mean camel, but idiomatically it can also mean a thick rope, and this is more likely the original meaning of Jesus’ words – that it is easier to thread a small needle with a thick rope (as opposed to a thin thread) than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.

At least one modern translation does translate the idiom in this way, and the lesson for us is simple. No matter how much we may

be attached to an older translation of the Bible, such as the King James Version, we owe it to our understanding of the Scriptures to at least occasionally read a newer translation, and certainly to check newer translations when we do not understand any portion of the Bible. No version is perfect, but good modern translations are more likely to translate Hebrew idioms with accurate meanings rather than with word for word translations that are simply not understandable to today's reader. A good modern translation will help render idioms understandably – rather than with expressions that may require “the length of two noses” to understand.

4. SYMBOLIC LANGUAGE

The language of many biblical books is rich with symbolism, and while some of the symbols used in the Bible are found in other cultures – like some of the figures of speech considered in the last chapter – many are specific to the Bible itself.

Symbols were used by biblical writers for various purposes. They are most common in the poetic and prophetic portions of the Bible, but they can appear in any of its books.

They were sometimes used to hide knowledge from some and to make it clear to others (Matthew 13:10-13). In other cases, symbols were used to conceal a meaning until it was time to reveal it (as was true with many of the messianic prophecies found in the Old Testament).

Biblical symbolism may also take different forms – it may be expressed in individual words or short phrases or may take the form of longer, more detailed stories, allegories, or parables. In this chapter we will look at all of these types of symbolism.

Words as Symbols

Whenever words are used in a non-literal sense in the Bible, they may have a symbolic meaning. In these cases we must read carefully in order to distinguish between normal figures of speech and symbolic language with a deeper meaning. Differentiating these meanings is seldom difficult, however; it is often just a matter of learning the various words of the Bible's "symbolic vocabulary." For example, "mountain" can often be symbolic of a nation (Isaiah 2:2; Ezekiel 36:1-15; etc.), just as "wind" may be a symbol of the Spirit of God (John 3:8; Acts 2:2; etc.).

We must be careful not to limit our understanding through associations that are too narrow, however. It is often said that the word "woman" is a symbol of the Church in scripture. While that is certainly true sometimes (2 Corinthians 11:2; Revelation 19:7; etc.),

a woman can also be used as a symbol of any large group of people such as a city or a nation (Lamentations 1:1-7; Jeremiah 6:2). It may be clear in a given scripture that the word “woman” is being used symbolically, but we still need to be careful to consider the range of possible meanings in its specific context.

Symbolic Phrases

Sometimes a biblical symbol is conveyed by a short phrase. On occasion such phrases can be difficult to understand, as they may have little context to help interpret them. For example, in his first epistle the apostle John writes “This is the one who came by water and blood – Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood” (1 John 5:6).

Some have interpreted the phrase “by water and blood” to symbolically refer to the Holy Spirit (symbolized by water) and humanity (symbolized by blood) to signify Jesus’ dual divine and human nature. This is an unlikely meaning because the passage continues to speak about the Holy Spirit as separate from the water and blood (vs. 8). It is more likely that the “water and blood” actually refer to Jesus’ baptism and crucifixion (see point 7 on substitution in the last chapter) – the beginning and end of his ministry – but the meaning of phrases such as these that are unique to biblical symbolism is not always easy to confirm.

Sometimes, in fact, we must simply look at the apparent possibilities regarding a symbolic phrase and accept that we are not sure which might be the correct meaning. One such example is when the apostle Paul wrote that in his day “the secret power of lawlessness” was already at work; but the “one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way” (2 Thessalonians 2:7). Despite a great many theories, we can only trust that if it were necessary to know more on this or similar subjects, more information would have been given. Fortunately, most symbolic phrases are not so difficult to interpret.

Stories, Allegories and Parables

The Bible contains many stories that are told in a symbolic manner. In Judges 9:8-15, the man Jotham tells how all the trees of the forest try to choose an unfit king to rule over them. The story is not explained directly, but its context makes it clear that it is symbolic of the people of Israel crowning the evil Abimelech.

In the New Testament, of course, the teaching of Jesus was full of symbolism, and many of the parables he told are simply symbolic stories. In fact, the Greek word *parabolē* from which we get the English word parable is sometimes translated “symbol.” It was through symbolism that Jesus was able to present himself to the people of his time not only as a Shepherd, a Farmer, a Bridegroom, and a King, but also, in true symbolic form, as a Cornerstone, a Door, a Vine, Bread, Light, and Water. He was also able to symbolically compare the kingdom of God to things ranging from a seed, a tree, a field, a net, a pearl, to a great wedding feast. Most of the parables of Jesus, like the various other symbolic stories found throughout the Bible, are explained in context and are relatively simple to understand – we just have to think about them.

Visions and Symbols

While many of the visions given by God and recorded in the Bible are understandable, some are more complex to interpret. For example, although the details of the apostle John’s vision of the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:9-27) are given in symbolic language, they are comprehensible and, as we will see, can even be compared with similar scriptures in Isaiah 60 that enhance or confirm our understanding of them.

On the other hand, in the vision recorded in Daniel 5, we find that after telling of the rise of “a goat with a prominent horn between his eyes” who “came from the west” (Daniel 8:5), which clearly equates with Macedonian Greece (vs. 21) and its king, Alexander the Great, the vision speaks of an individual of great evil

who would arise at a later time (vs. 23). The details of this part of the vision indicate this individual may have been Alexander's eventual successor Antiochus Epiphanes who outlawed Judaism and slaughtered thousands in Jerusalem in 167 BC. But Daniel also records that he was told to "seal up the vision, for it concerns the distant future" (vs. 26), so many students of the Bible see the possibility of a later individual of whom Antiochus was an earlier type (see Matthew 24:15-16; etc.). Daniel concluded that parts of his vision were "beyond understanding" (vs. 27) in his time, and we do well to treat the symbolic aspects of such biblical visions with care, seeing possible fulfillments, but keeping an open mind to other possibilities.

Although such mysterious symbolic visions may get our attention, overall it is thinking about the Bible's use of simple symbolic words that can often be most profitable, as we see in the following example.

Case Study: A Sun and a Shield

King David certainly had a way with words - not just in the eloquence and poetry of many of the psalms he composed, but also in the symbols he uses to talk about God. "The Lord God is a sun and shield" (Psalm 84:11) is a great example of this.

Today, it is easy to read over those two words "sun" and "shield" and to see them only as a reference to the sun as a great light and a shield as an antiquated symbol of protection. But in the society in which David wrote, those two words were packed with an amazing amount of meaning.

In ancient Israel, as in much of the ancient Near East, the sun was not only a symbol of light, but of sustenance and life itself. The ancients understood that without the sun there would be no crops and therefore no life. The sun also symbolized many aspects related to light, such as righteousness, just as we see in the biblical statement: "But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise" (Malachi 4:2). In the same way, just as

today a pair of scales symbolizes fairness and thus justice, in the biblical world, because of its association with light and righteousness, the sun symbolized justice. As a result, for several of the polytheistic cultures around Israel the sun god was the god of justice. We see this association of sun and justice in biblical verses such as “He will bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noonday sun” (Psalm 37:6 ESV) and in the ironic statement in Ecclesiastes: “And I saw something else under the sun: In the place of judgment – wickedness was there” (Ecclesiastes 3:16).

In David’s time, there were many other associations that would have been recognized between the sun and characteristics such as majesty and strength. When David wrote that the sun was like: “...a bridegroom leaving his chamber, and, like a strong man, runs its course with joy” (Psalm 19:4-5 ESV), he was referring to the majesty of a bridegroom in his splendid wedding garments and the strength of a champion runner. These were concepts that his hearers would have easily understood by means of the symbolism of the sun.

The shield, in a similar way, primarily connoted protection and refuge and is often used alongside the image of God as a “rock,” as in verses such as: “my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation” (2 Samuel 22: 3), and “you are a shield around me, O LORD” (Psalm 3:3). In this sense, the shield was used as a symbol of help in any difficulty: “The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and he helps me” (Psalm 28:7 and see Psalm 115:9-11). But the shield not only signified protection, rescue, and help, it also connoted many other things. It could symbolize kingship (Psalm 84:9) as well as monarchical power and kingly treasures, and even the words of God (Proverbs 30:5).

So, light, life, sustenance, righteousness, justice, strength, majesty, power, protection, refuge, rescue, help, kingship, monarchy, the treasures of kings, the words of God, and many other things may all be symbolized in the two words “sun” and “shield”

that David used in Psalm 84:11. Most of these symbolically-associated meanings would have been clear to the psalmist's original readers with only a little thought. The more we think about the symbols used in biblical verses about God, the more we can often understand about his nature. Not all the Bible's descriptions of God are phrased in symbolic language, of course, but it can often richly repay us to think about those descriptive symbols. Even if they are only one or two words, they may be packed with meaning – and better understanding of such “small-scale” symbols is often just as valuable as coming to understand larger symbolic issues.

5. TOOLS FOR LOOKING AT THE TEXT

Translations

Choosing a good translation of the Bible is probably the single most important physical thing we can do to grow in understanding of the word of God. But there are dozens of Bible translations or “versions” available in English – how can you choose the “best” one for your purposes?

First, we need to realize that there is no such thing as a “perfect” translation, although some are certainly much less imperfect than others! We often need to choose a translation based on our specific requirements – perhaps an easy reading version for daily study or a more precise, though not as easy to read, version to check scriptures regarding doctrine or important details. Ideally, we might find a single translation that works well for both needs, but often it is a good idea to have two translations if possible. We should always check several translations to decide important questions.

As we mentioned in the preceding chapters, translation can be done in two ways – a word-for-word (technically called the “formal equivalence”) approach, versus a meaning-for-meaning or thought-for-thought (“dynamic equivalence”) approach. While an exact word-for-word translation might seem desirable, we can’t always do that without actually clouding the meaning of what is being translated. For example, the Hebrew Bible uses the expression “God’s nostrils enlarged” and even the King James Version, a word-for-word translation, had to use a meaning-for-meaning approach for this expression which means “God became angry.”

On the other hand, while this approach works well for translating idioms, if we just translate for “meaning” all the time, we run the risk of the translator’s understanding of the meaning entering into

the picture, so that what is translated is not really in the text at all. *The New International Version*, for example, translates Ephesians 6:6 to say that slaves should “Obey [their masters] not only to win their favor...” But the word “only” is not in the original Greek, and this addition changes the sense considerably. More heavily meaning-based versions such as the *Living Bible* or *The Message Bible* are really paraphrases – often using different words entirely to try to convey the meaning. While they can be very easy to read, these are not always appropriate for serious study.

Some Bible versions try to balance between formal and dynamic equivalence in their translation. The results are not always perfect, but some of these versions do a very creditable job. *The New International Version* and *New English Translation* are good examples of such versions, liked by many. Sometimes, however, we need a version that is more literal to make sure we are getting exactly what was said. In those cases, versions such as the *English Standard Version* and the *World English Bible* can be good choices.

Often, simply reading a difficult passage in a number of translations can greatly help in coming to understand it. The good news is that if cost or availability are issues, or for electronic reading convenience, a number of these Bibles are available for free download from the www.FreeChristianEBooks.org website. The versions of the Bible mentioned above and a great many others – including Bibles in most foreign languages – can also be read online for free on some of the many internet Bible sites such as www.BibleGateway.com and www.BibleHub.com.

Basic Tools for Studying the Text

When we are unsure of the meaning of a given verse or passage of Scripture, the fastest way to get help is often to turn to a good Bible commentary, but commentaries vary considerably in quality, and some can be biased toward a particular denominational or doctrinal position. For this reason, mainstream commentaries produced by interdenominational teams or scholars recognized for their

impartial work are often the most reliable. Whenever possible, it is always good to compare multiple commentaries in order to get a range of interpretations on any given verse. When dealing with both translations and commentaries, comparison is key!

A good resource for this is www.BibleHub.com – which not only provides a good number of translations of each Bible verse on the same page, but also has many Bible commentaries conveniently linked to each verse. Another website that can be helpful in choosing a Bible commentary is www.bestcommentaries.com which provides reviews and links to a great many single and multivolume commentaries.

Sometimes, in our study, the precise meaning of a word in the biblical text may be needed. Even when this involves working with Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic words, there are some basic tools anyone can use to accomplish this. The Blue Letter Bible website www.blueletterbible.org has a “Lexicon” search feature to find the Hebrew or Greek words underlying a given English word such as “love” or “obedience” and shows where those words appear in the Bible. A number of other Bible web pages, such as the one at www.biblehub.com/interlinear, also provide basic “interlinear” translations that allow users to find what the Hebrew or Greek words are in any biblical verse, and then to click on a given word to get its full definition and the instances where it appears in the Bible.

Using such sites cannot make us “overnight Bible scholars,” of course, and we must always remember that other factors such as the grammar of the original biblical languages are also involved for in-depth understanding. But if we want to do basic level searches, these tools can certainly provide much good information that can be helpful in increasing our understanding of the text of the Bible.

**STEP TWO:
LOOKING AT
THE CONTEXT**

6. THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT

Bible verses need a “home”! When we try to understand things the Bible says outside of the setting in which they were originally written, we can miss their meaning and purpose completely. And when verses get lifted out of their natural setting to be quoted in isolation, they can all too frequently be misunderstood and misused.

As is often said, “context is everything.” Yet even experienced Bible students sometimes forget the need to keep context in mind in everything that is studied and especially in looking at difficult or puzzling scriptures.

Our English word “context” is derived from two Latin words (*con* “together” + *texere* “to weave”) meaning “to weave together,” so context signifies the relationship between something and its surroundings – just as a small woven area is connected to other parts in a large tapestry.

In Bible study, this means, of course, that we need to consider other verses connected in some way to the verse we are studying. Usually that involves reading the whole chapter or section of Scripture in which the passage we are studying is located. Even as early as the sixteenth century, Miles Coverdale, translator of the English Bible, wrote:

“... it shall greatly help thee to understand scripture, if thou mark [pay attention to] not only what is spoken or written, but ... what goeth before, and what followeth after” (Miles Coverdale, Preface to the Bible, 1535).

In the following chapters we will consider these connections within the Bible that can greatly increase our understanding of what we

study. First, we look at *immediate* context – the setting of a given biblical statement in its surrounding verses – and then *overall* context – the relationship between an individual statement and everything else the Bible may say on that subject. Both are vital.

When we consider *immediate* context, it is amazing how many well-known and frequently-quoted verses can be seen to have a different meaning when carefully read with their surrounding verses. For example, the apostle Paul's statement: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13 NKJV) does not mean we can run a one-minute mile any more than Paul could have walked out of his jail cell when he wrote that. The immediate context shows Paul is talking about being able to do anything God gave him to do.

When we look at *overall* context, we often find that a verse or even a whole chapter in one part of the Bible has a similar counterpart elsewhere, in related books or in other books by the same author, that can clarify the passage we are looking at. For example, in the Old Testament, 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles contain many parallel accounts; and in the New Testament, parts of Paul's epistles to the Galatians and Romans, or to the Ephesians and Colossians, are clearly parallel and can be used to help explain each other.

In a similar manner, we need to look at how the Old and New Testaments relate to each other. In some cases, books in the New Testament help explain books in the Old Testament or vice versa, such as Daniel and Revelation or Leviticus and Hebrews.

Finally, we need to consider literary context. Often the type of literature by which we classify a biblical book or passage can help us to better understand what we read.

We will see in the following chapters that clearly seeing the context of what the Bible says at any point is one of the most important factors in really coming to understand what we read.

7. CONTEXT NEAR AND FAR

When individual verses or passages of scripture get lifted out of their natural setting, they can be misunderstood, instill false hope – or worse, be misused in a harmful manner. Free floating verses used in this way are often called “proof texts,” but the truth is, a verse out of context very often proves nothing. It is only when scriptures are read and understood in proper context that we understand and use them as they were intended.

Immediate Context

The “home” or primary context of any biblical passage is its immediate context – the words coming before or after it within the same paragraph, chapter or book that form a continuous discussion. In other words, the verse directly before a given scripture may not be important to its context if the subject is a different one, but even a verse several chapters earlier can be important to a scripture’s context if it is part of the author’s discussion. Usually, however, immediate context involves the verses directly before or after a given statement. Many biblical statements and verses can seem to have a very different meaning if they are taken away from that “home” or immediate context. Consider a few examples.

Ecclesiastes 7:28, out of context, makes a seemingly startling statement: “While I was still searching but not finding – I found one upright man among a thousand, but not one upright woman among them all.” At first sight this sounds like a very sad situation, but if we look carefully at the immediate context, we see that the section beginning in vs. 26 is talking about prostitutes who snare gullible men. All Solomon is saying here is that although there may

be “one in a thousand” men who resist such a woman (clearly using an idiomatic expression for a round number), he found not a single upright woman in this group. Other statements by Solomon – Proverbs 12:4, 31:10, etc. – show that the king certainly did not condemn all women.

The book of Isaiah contains another example: “To whom will he teach knowledge, and to whom will he explain the message? ... For it is precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little” (Isaiah 28:9-13 ESV). These words are frequently quoted to show that we must put all the related verses together in Bible study; but, ironically, the real context of Isaiah’s words is actually not one of the people of God carefully piecing together God’s messages. The words were actually spoken against those who do not obey God and the directly following words are “... that they may go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken” (vs. 13). So although the principle of carefully putting the scriptures together is certainly one that we can follow, the context of Isaiah 28:9-13 does not really show that!

In the book of Matthew we find a similar situation where Jesus is recorded as saying: “For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them” (Matthew 18:20). While this verse is frequently taken to mean gathering in church fellowship, the actual immediate context is about correcting someone for a problem (vs. 15-18), and asking God’s help in the process (vs. 19). The teaching here is quite different from how it is often understood out of context.

Overall Context

If, as we said above, Bible verses need a home – the setting of their surrounding verses – they also need a “citizenship,” a connection with similar verses on the same topic scattered over a wider area of the Bible. One of the most important aspects of context is that of

seeing and interpreting every part of the Bible in the light of the whole. Some verses, such as John 3:16, may be clear in isolation, but even then, considering other verses relevant to this very clear statement expands our understanding and appreciation for its meaning. In many other cases, overall context is actually necessary for proper understanding. We can see this in the following examples taken from the Old and New Testaments.

Second Kings 2:1 tells us that Elijah was taken by a whirlwind “up to heaven.” It is easy to misunderstand this statement without overall biblical context. But when we put other relevant scriptures together, we see that from the perspective of the biblical writers, there are three heavens (2 Corinthians 12:2). Over nine hundred years after the time of Elijah, Jesus himself said “no man has ascended up to heaven” (John 3:13 KJ2K), meaning the heaven of God. So 2 Kings is evidently talking about the “heaven” that we would call the sky or the atmosphere - just as the Bible speaks of the “dew of heaven” (Genesis 27:28, 39 ESV).

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul stresses that salvation comes by faith alone (Ephesians 2:8-9; etc.), yet the apostle James states that faith without works is dead (James 2:14-26) – giving us the other side of the picture. In fact, if we look further into the writings of Paul himself, we find statements which back this up; for example: “It is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous” (Romans 2:13). So overall context shows that we are saved by faith, but saving faith is never alone – living faith leads us to right behavior and good works.

The first of the two examples we looked at, that of Elijah ascending to heaven, shows overall context clarifying a small part of the story. But in the second example, we see overall context is clearly necessary to understand some of the most important concepts in the Bible. So Bible verses really do need both a “home” and a “citizenship” – an immediate and an overall context.

In some instances, we need to consider both immediate and overall context, as we see in the following case study.

Case Study: The Rock on which the Church Is Built

In this example we will consider the importance of context in understanding Christ's famous words to Peter: "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18). There are two traditional answers to the question of who or what was the rock Christ referred to in this verse. Some Christians believe that Jesus was speaking to Peter, and so Peter is the rock the church would be built upon. Other Christians believe that because the Greek word for the "rock" the Church would be built upon is *petra* – a "large rock" or "foundation" – and Peter's name was *petros* – meaning a small rock or pebble in Greek – Christ could hardly have been speaking of Peter and must have been speaking of himself when he said "on this rock"

Looking closely at the immediate context of this verse reveals another meaning that fits Jesus' statement better than either of these two options. When we look at Christ's words, we find they were part of a larger conversation he was having with Peter:

Jesus ... asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven,

and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah (Matthew 16:13-20).

The conversation begins and ends with the concept of Christ’s identity – Jesus first asks his disciples who people thought he was, and who they thought he was, then, after discussing the answers they gave, he closes the discussion by telling his disciples not to tell people who he was. When we keep this clear context of the conversation in mind, we see the subject of the whole exchange was “Who is Jesus?”

The crux of the conversation occurs when Peter volunteers “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). It is precisely then that Jesus confirmed this assessment and told Peter that this was the “rock” or “foundation” – we might say “foundational truth” – on which his Church would be built. Jesus’ point was that his Church would be built on the fact that he was the promised Messiah, the one through whom salvation would come, though this was a truth the disciples were told not to reveal until the time was right (vs. 20).

In this case, immediate context doubtless shows the meaning of Jesus’ words to Peter regarding the rock or foundation on which the Church would be built. But looking further afield at overall context, if we search for other related verses on this subject, we find that our answer is confirmed by the apostle Paul when he wrote:

you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:19-20).

8. CONTEXT OLD AND NEW

One of the most important areas of interrelation between different areas of the Bible that we must keep in mind in our study is that of the connection between the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures – the Old and New Testaments. It is not just that the New Testament followed the Old, but also that the two are connected at a number of levels that affect our understanding of both parts.

Augustine may have been the first one who said that the New Testament is concealed in the Old Testament and the Old Testament is revealed in the New Testament. This means that there is a tremendous amount of context that we must consider in our study of the Scriptures. Thousands of verses in the Old Testament find fulfillment or explanation in the New, and almost three-quarters of the material in the New Testament is either a quotation from or allusion to material in the Old Testament. In practical terms, this means that although it is natural to see the two Testaments as being separate and to study them that way, we need to continually look at related material in the Old and the New.

The New Testament Hidden in the Old

No area of interconnection between the two Testaments is more important, of course, than that regarding the promised Messiah. We see figurative allusions to the One who would rescue humanity from the very first chapters of the Bible when God tells the serpent “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (Genesis 3:15), to the words found in the very last chapter of the Old Testament: “the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays” (Malachi 4:2). Between these references the Old Testament contains hundreds (by some counts over 600) messianic references, many of them amazingly detailed.

For example, in Psalm 22, which was written somewhere around 1000 BC, we find not only the prediction: “they pierce my hands and my feet” (Psalm 22:16), but also a total of eleven distinct prophecies which were clearly fulfilled in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. In the same way, in Isaiah 52:13-53:12 (from around 740-680 BC), in addition to the prophecy “But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5), we find every verse of this whole section is a detailed description of the sacrificial servant Messiah.

It is only as we look at the New Testament accounts of the death of Christ from the perspective of these far older references that we can fully understand the later accounts – which is why, of course, the New Testament writers quoted them so often: not simply to “prove” that Jesus was the promised Messiah, but to explain the full significance of that fact.

Although they are the best known of all the Old Testament scriptures that foreshadow events in the New, the messianic references are not the only ones that help us understand the later scriptures. In addition to prophecies relating to other individuals (such as John the Baptist and Judas the betrayer of Christ), many aspects of the Old Testament clarify details found in the New.

The Old Testament Revealed in the New

In his sermon on the Day of Pentecost, after the giving of the Holy Spirit, the apostle Peter cited not only Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah that were fulfilled by Christ (Acts 3:25-28, 34-35), but also other scriptures speaking of the pouring out of the Spirit of God (Acts 3:17-18) and the opportunity of salvation being given to all the Gentiles (Acts 3:21). These events were mysteries without explanation during the Old Testament era and were only made clear in the events that occurred in New Testament times.

We must not limit our understanding of the principle of the “Old revealed in the New” to prophetic statements, however. There are

many New Testament scriptures that clarify or explain Old Testament writings. In the book of Hebrews, for example, we have a detailed description of the workings of the tabernacle and the later temple that not only reveals the meaning of the various parts of those structures and their sacrificial rituals, but also shows that the physical structures mirror a spiritual temple which give the earlier physical counterparts their true significance (Hebrews 8-9).

In the following case study we will see just how much keeping the connections between the Old and New Testaments in mind can expand our understanding and appreciation for biblical texts.

Case Study: Seeing Isaiah in Revelation

The New Testament book of Revelation quotes the Old Testament hundreds of times (estimates range depending on whether only direct quotations or allusions are counted). Looked at another way, of the 404 verses in Revelation, some 278 of them (almost 70%) make clear reference to the Old Testament, and some of those verses actually contain two, or even three, Old Testament parallels.

For example, we can better understand Revelation's vision of a "new heaven and new earth" (Revelation 21), by comparing it with prophecies in Chapter 60 of the book of Isaiah. When we do this, we see that the apostle John's statements in Revelation were actually part of a continuing inspired prophetic tradition. John adds many details to the prophetic picture, but looking back at Isaiah's earlier words can also provide more context for John's later statements.

Parallel Visions

Isaiah 60:1 "the glory of the Lord rises upon you."

Revelation 21:3 "God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them."

Isaiah 60:3 "Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn."

Revelation 21:24 “The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it.”

Isaiah 60:5 “the wealth on the seas will be brought to you,”

Revelation 21:1 “and there was no longer any sea.”

Isaiah 60:5 “... to you the riches of the nations will come.”

Revelation 21:26 “The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it.”

The Holy City

Isaiah 60:11 “Your gates will always stand open, they will never be shut, day or night,”

Revelation 21:25 “On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there.”

Isaiah 60:12 “For the nation or kingdom that will not serve you will perish; it will be utterly ruined.”

Revelation 21:8 “But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur.”

Isaiah 60:14 “the City of the Lord, Zion of the Holy One of Israel.”

Revelation 21:10 “the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.”

Isaiah 60:18 “you will call your walls Salvation and your gates Praise.”

Revelation 21:12, 21 “It had a great, high wall with twelve gates and with twelve angels at the gates. On the gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel ... The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl.”

The End of Darkness

Isaiah 60:19 “The sun will no more be your light by day, nor will the brightness of the moon shine on you, for the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory.”

Revelation 21:23 “The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp.”

Isaiah 60:20 “Your sun will never set again, and your moon will wane no more; the Lord will be your everlasting light,”

Revelation 21:25 “...for there will be no night there.”

Isaiah 60:20 “... and your days of sorrow will end.”

Revelation 21:4 “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

Isaiah 60:21 “Then all your people will be righteous and they will possess the land forever.”

Revelation 21:27 “Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life.”

The two chapters are so similar that some sceptics claim John “copied” Isaiah in Revelation, but this can hardly be the case because John knew a great many of his readers would be familiar with the book of Isaiah. Besides, John’s vision contains many details that are additional to and independent of what Isaiah wrote – which fits the overall principle of progressive revelation through time that we find unfolding throughout the Bible.

9. LITERARY CONTEXT

Utilizing context in Bible study involves more than just looking at similar verses from near and far and bringing together older and newer statements that are related. We need to see biblical statements in terms of their literary context as well.

Hebrews 1:1 tells us that “God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways.” At the broadest level, these “various ways” can include the different types of literature in which the messages were delivered or recorded. We must learn to differentiate and keep in mind these various kinds of literature if we are to successfully understand what they are saying.

Think of the phone book – it is not all printed in the same format: there are white pages, yellow pages, advertisements, all with their own format and different kinds of information. We read each section of the phone book differently – with different expectations about what kind of information we are getting.

The Bible also contains different types of information in different formats such as narratives, poetry, prophecy, messages, wisdom, laws, letters, and lists. Some biblical books are primarily one form of literature or another – just as the book of Judges is mainly narrative and the book of Psalms is primarily poetry. But there can also be different types of literature within individual books – as we find, for example, in some of the prophetic books which contain sections of narrative, poetry, prophecy, and even other literary types.

Fortunately, this situation is not as complicated as it may at first seem. Most of the different types of literature contained in the Bible are written in straightforward prose and, for the most part, can be understood literally and are not difficult to understand. It is mainly with the poetic and prophetic literary forms that we need to pay special attention to literary context.

Poetic Material

While we may think of the poetry in the Bible as being found mainly in just a few books like Psalms and the Song of Solomon, in reality about thirty percent of the Hebrew Bible is written in poetic form. The book of Isaiah, for example, is almost entirely written in poetic form, and many other biblical books have sections of narrative text mixed with sections of poetic text.

Much of the time we are able to sense when we are reading such poetic material. For example, where Isaiah says that they who wait on God will “soar on wings like eagles” (Isaiah 40:31) or David says of his enemies “Break the teeth in their mouths, O God” (Psalm 58:6), it is clear that they do not mean those things literally, and that the writers are speaking poetically. We realize that such statements need to be understood as being expressive of ideas rather than expressions of facts.

It is not always obvious whether we are looking at poetry or prose, however, and modern translations can help us with that. Older translations, such as the King James Version, usually printed everything in the same format. More recent translations, such as the English Standard Version and New International Version, help considerably by printing different literary formats in different fonts and layouts so we can see the nature of a given verse in its literary context more clearly.

But there is still a potential problem. Even when it is clear what is poetry and what is prose, many people have an almost instinctive reaction to poetry – they see it as somehow less real than prose, as more imaginative and less factual. The examples we gave above from Isaiah and Psalms certainly show that poetry can be that way, but that does not mean that all poetically expressed statements cannot be understood literally. Just as we should be on the lookout for poetic sections within prose narratives, we should also watch for literal meanings within poetic sections of text.

Prophetic Material

Understanding that poetic forms can include literal facts is also extremely important for Bible study because most prophecies found throughout the Bible are expressed in poetic form. Not only most of Isaiah, but also large sections of Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Minor Prophets are written as poetry. This means that in studying prophetic sections of the Bible, we have to stay aware of the need to switch back and forth from reading what is clearly not literal to what may well be intended literally.

Even statements that might look literal at first may not be, or vice versa. In Isaiah 40:3-4 we find a prediction that valleys will be raised up and mountains made low and that rough ground and rugged places will be made a smooth plain. But Luke 3:4-6 shows that this prophecy of Isaiah was fulfilled symbolically in the preaching of John the Baptist. So although they may sound like literal geographic references, we see that the leveling of valleys, mountains, and rugged areas spoken of in Isaiah 40:3-4 must be symbols of something else – the leveling away of difficulties, with the idea of making a smooth path for the promised Messiah. As we might say today, John “leveled the playing field” by calling all to repentance, not just those who were looked down on as sinners.

One of the big lessons we can learn regarding context in the Bible is the need to see biblical statements in terms of the specific literary types in which they were originally composed – so that we can look at them in that context and apply the special views they require.

This is particularly true with prophetic material. It may not always be clear to us whether a given prophecy is to be understood literally or symbolically, but understanding and remembering the possible viewpoints within different literary types can greatly increase the likelihood of our correctly understanding the words we read in these cases.

Literary Devices

Literary aspects of the biblical writings can be more than just kinds of literature or types of expression, however. Many biblical writers used “literary devices” – specific ways of handling words to achieve specific purposes.

For example, you may have noticed when reading the New Testament that the Gospel writers often insert one story into another, interrupting the first story, as it were, to inject a second – and often seemingly unrelated – story. This literary technique is called intercalation, but biblical scholars often fondly refer to it simply as a “literary sandwich”! Consider the following “sandwich” from the Gospel of Mark where the inset story has been set in italic typeface:

Now the Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread were only two days away, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were scheming to arrest Jesus secretly and kill him...

While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume ... She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head. Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, “Why this waste of perfume? It could have been sold for more than a year’s wages and the money given to the poor.” And they rebuked her harshly...

Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them. They were delighted to hear this and promised to give him money (Mark 14:1-11).

As we see in this example, Mark could easily have finished his story about the plot to kill Jesus before writing about the woman who anointed him. Alternately, he could have told that story first before going on to the plot against Jesus.

We know this is a conscious literary technique because sometimes we find one Gospel writer using the “sandwich” technique when another does not for the same event – for example, the story of the cursed fig tree (see Matthew 21:18-22 for the standard story, Mark 11:12-26 for the sandwiched story).

In telling the stories of the anointing of Jesus and the plot to kill him, Mark chose to use the sandwich literary technique by inserting one story inside the other and in that way encouraging us, as readers, to think about the two stories together – to think about some connection they have.

This is because the purpose of Gospel sandwiches such as this one is to compare some aspect of the first story with that same aspect in the second story that is inserted in the middle. In this case, it is clearly the great contrast in attitude toward money that is evident in comparing the woman’s selfless attitude of giving to the selfish attitude of taking exhibited by Judas.

Our personal Bible study is deepened when we learn to watch for and think about such sandwich stories when we find them in the Gospels – and we need to remember to always look to see what the intended contrast is in these stories.

There are many such literary techniques used by the biblical writers to teach the lessons they wanted to convey. Another technique often found in the Gospels is that of “crossovers,” as we see in the following case study.

Case Study: “Crossovers” in the Gospels

Throughout the Gospels we find a number of stories that are given in the form of “crossovers” (technically called “chiasms”). These are narratives in which the second half of the story reverses the order of the events in the first half – the reversal taking place after a central “pivotal” event. As we will see, this structure is important for understanding the key point of the story.

Example 1: A Sabbath Sermon (Luke 4:15-28).

1. **People were pleased with Jesus' teaching**
2. On the Sabbath day he went into the **synagogue**
3. He **stood up** to read,
4. and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah **was handed to him**.
5. **Unrolling it**, he found the place where it is written:
6. *Jesus reads from Isaiah in the synagogue. [pivotal event]*
7. Then he **rolled up the scroll**
8. **gave it back to the attendant**
9. and **sat down**.
10. The eyes of everyone in the **synagogue** were fastened on him.
11. **People were offended at Jesus' teaching**

Example 2: Zacchaeus the Tax Collector (Luke 19:1-10, 28).

1. Jesus – **arrives**
2. Zacchaeus – **took money** from others
3. The crowd – **follows** Jesus
4. Zacchaeus – **climbs up** the sycamore tree
5. *Jesus extends acceptance to Zacchaeus. [pivotal event]*
6. Zacchaeus – **climbs down** the sycamore tree
7. The crowd – **rejects** Jesus
8. Zacchaeus – **gives money** to others
9. Jesus – **leaves**

Example 3: A Fish Crossover (Luke 5:1-11).

1. **Crowds follow Jesus**
2. The **boat goes out**
3. **Jesus speaks to Peter** (Catch fish!)
4. **Peter speaks to Jesus** (in arrogance) [uses *epistates* “overseer”]
5. *Miraculous catch of fish [pivotal event]*
6. **Peter speaks to Jesus** (in repentance) [now uses *kyrios* “lord”]
7. **Jesus speaks to Peter** (Catch people!)
8. The **boat returns**
9. The **boat on the shore**
10. **Disciples follow Jesus**

The main purpose of crossover stories like these is to stress the changes that take place after the pivotal event at the center of the story. In the first example we see the change of attitude in the people of Jesus' hometown after he speaks to them. In the second example we see the change in Zacchaeus after his acceptance by Christ. In the final example, we see the change in Peter's attitude – and Jesus' new command to him – after the miraculous catch of fish. In each case the story is told around a pivotal point, and important changes are stressed in the second half of the narrative.

The mirror image halves of stories of this type may have originally been a result of their careful construction to aid memorization and oral telling, or the structure may have been added by the writers who recorded the events in the Gospels. In either case, by noticing and thinking about these crossover narratives, we can much better understand the thrust of each story told in this manner.

Being aware of such crossover stories in the Gospels can help us to look out not only for stories of this type, but also for other literary devices that the Gospel writers used – and through which we can better understand their messages.

10. TOOLS FOR LOOKING AT THE CONTEXT

Checking the immediate context of a biblical statement requires no special tools, of course, but when we need to move to the broader context of what is said on a given topic in a whole book, the whole Old or New Testament, or the whole Bible, we need help. Many Bibles contain reference columns or notes that list related scriptures elsewhere in the Bible, and these can be helpful but are seldom complete and may not include important scriptures.

Concordances and Topical Bibles

Bible concordances and topical Bibles, which list all the scriptures containing a given word or on a given topic, are much more complete – but these are translation specific, of course, and will only include the scriptures having a given word in the translation on which they are based. The old but still useful *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* and *Young's Analytical Concordance to the Bible*, both based on the King James Version, are popular with many Bible students.

Online Bible sites can also be very helpful in this regard. The best ones allow a person to search all the occurrences of a given word in a number of translations – so we can get a very good approximation of the full context of a given biblical word or idea. For example, the search features of internet sites such as BibleGateway.com and BlueLetterBible.com allow the user to quickly search for all occurrences of a given word in any of their many translations, and the search can be narrowed to instances in specific Bible books or a range of books.

However, when utilizing searches of this kind it is a good idea to spend a few moments thinking of synonyms for the term you wish to research, as some Bible verses may use slightly different words for the same concept (such as “faith,” “trust,” etc.). Different translations will also give different results. For example, the NIV Bible contains 574 instances of the word “love,” while the ESV contains 551 instances of the same word. Clearly, the ESV is using some other synonyms for love – such as compassion or affection – in its translation.

Biblical Harmonies

There are also some tools for looking at specific biblical contexts such as harmonies of the Gospels which place the material from each of the four Gospels side by side in parallel columns. Some just compare the three Synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – while others also include John’s Gospel, which is difficult to mesh with the others, but which often adds additional material, of course.

Harmonies of the Gospels are available from various publishers, and several free harmonies can be found online. For example, a multiple column harmony based on the New American Standard Bible can be found at: www.biblehub.com/parallelgospels/. You can also download a parallel harmony based on the NET Bible here: www.bible.org/assets/pdf/Peyton_GospelHarmony.pdf.

Whether you choose to purchase a printed harmony for use in your study of the Gospels or elect to use one of the available free online versions such as those mentioned here, using a harmony can give you a fresh and often fascinating view of the story the Gospels tell and can also often help you to better understand passages that are somewhat unclear in one of the Gospel accounts. For the Old Testament, a harmony of the books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles is also available.

The use of concordances, topical Bibles, and harmonies makes it relatively simple to look at the broader context of any biblical verse.

**STEP THREE:
LOOKING AT
THE BACKGROUND**

11. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BACKGROUND

Many of us grow up with some knowledge of the background to the Bible. Even from childhood we may have had at least a mental picture of the kind of clothes people wore in the Near East in biblical times, and we know they had camels and kings! If we have read a little about the biblical world or seen films and television programs about it, we may know a little more about the great empires with which ancient Israel interacted, and that by the time of Christ, Judea was part of the Roman Empire. But, surprisingly, many Christians never go much beyond this very basic picture and do not realize how a little more knowledge of the world of the Bible can tremendously enrich and deepen our knowledge of the Scriptures themselves. Background information can often shed light on Bible passages that we cannot get from the text or context.

Imagine, for a moment, what it would be like if you were to visit a foreign country where you do not speak the language and do not know much about the culture of the people. But you want to find out what is going on, so you buy a newspaper, and ask a friend who knows the language to translate the stories for you. When you read the translated stories, although you can understand the words, you realize you still don't fully understand many of the things that are said because you don't know what articles are alluding to, the background to the stories, or the significance of the examples they mention. You can understand a lot, but there is much that you are not getting. Undeterred, you spend a little time reading about the history and culture of the country, its political parties and problems, and then you are pleasantly surprised at how much better you suddenly understand what is being said in its newspapers.

Reading the Bible can be much like such an experience in a foreign country. This is not to say that you cannot learn a great deal from reading a good translation of the Bible without any outside information whatsoever. But if we do not know anything about the history and culture of the ancient biblical world, we are always going to miss many of the allusions the Bible makes, many of the meanings in its stories, and many of the points that its ancient readers would have seen immediately. The things we miss may not be matters essential to salvation, but they do frequently affect our grasp of biblical doctrines and principles of living, so there is every reason to consider spending a little time learning information that will help us understand the Bible better.

In the following chapters we will take a look at some examples from the archaeology, history, and culture of the biblical world to see how knowledge of these areas can greatly repay us in our study of God's word.

12. ARCHAEOLOGY

Archaeology is a fascinating field of study that can help us better understand the Bible in a number of ways. Nevertheless, it is an area in which we should exercise caution, because a great deal of what appears on the internet and in print regarding the “archaeology” of the Bible is unsubstantiated and not based on the actual findings of archaeology at all. Each year stories surface on the internet, in newspapers, and eventually in books of the remains of Pharaoh’s army found in the Red Sea, parts of Noah’s Ark found on Mount Ararat and other, similar stories which claim to substantiate some story in the Scriptures. Most of these spectacular claims are not based on fact, however, and are often unsuspectingly spread by those who would like to believe them, but do not know how to confirm or disprove the stories for themselves.

On the other hand, much has been found in the course of archaeological research that has not only confirmed aspects of many of the Bible’s accounts, but also has greatly enriched our understanding of its details. Consider the following examples of some of the many discoveries made in the past few years.

Recently, news media reported the discovery of a seal imprint of the famous biblical king Hezekiah that had been found near the wall surrounding Jerusalem’s “Old City.” The seal imprint was actually found several years ago along with other inscriptions, but it was only recently, when these seal impressions were studied, that it was discovered that one was inscribed “Belonging to Hezekiah [the son of] Ahaz king of Judah.” This find has been widely publicized as proving the existence of the biblical Hezekiah, which it certainly does, but the find also has even broader significance.

A number of objects have been found in excavations in Israel bearing the names of individuals and groups mentioned in the

Bible. Skeptics are often quick to dismiss these objects when the names are not clearly associated with the individuals to whom they might refer, but in the case of this seal, Hezekiah is said to be the son of Ahaz (2 Kings 18:1), removing any doubt that this Hezekiah is the Hezekiah of the Bible. This irrefutable connection helps show that other biblical names found in archaeological contexts very possibly also attest actual biblical characters. Biblical individuals who are very probably or certainly attested in archaeological finds include King David (on a ninth century BC stele from northern Israel which mentions the “House of David”) and King Jehu (in an inscription of the Assyrian king Shalmanesar III which mentions tribute paid by “Jehu, the son of Omri”), as well as the Prophet Isaiah (on an inscribed ring), and others.

The findings of archaeology have, in fact, silenced skepticism about the Bible in a number of areas. If we go back a little over a hundred years, doubters regarded the Hittite people mentioned in the Old Testament as a fiction because, apart from references to them in the Bible, there was no evidence they actually existed. Today, Hittitology is an important part of Ancient Near Eastern studies, the palaces and cities of these people have been excavated, and many thousands of Hittite texts have been found and translated. Far from not existing, the Hittites were, in fact, a dominant power in their part of the world until around 1200 BC.

There are many such instances where archaeology has shown the Bible record is set in reality. Skeptics once claimed that Moses (c. 1300-1400 BC) could not have written the first five books of the Bible because it was presumed that Semitic peoples did not have writing until long after his time. Because of archaeology, we know now that phonetic writing in Semitic languages existed from well before the time of Moses – perhaps as early as 1800-1900 BC.

Consider one more example of something the Bible clearly records which is still rejected by many today. Leviticus 18 tells us that God planned to cast the Canaanites and related peoples out of

the Promised Land due to their extreme depravity. That chapter accuses the Canaanites of many evil practices, including child sacrifice. Some modern doubters have challenged the likelihood that this practice actually existed in ancient Canaan and claimed that there is no actual historical proof for it. Archaeological evidence of child sacrifice by the Canaanites has been found, however. Ancient reliefs carved around the time of the Egyptian pharaoh Ramesses II, in the temples of Karnak and Luxor, actually depict this abominable Canaanite practice. The reliefs depict Egyptian soldiers attacking Canaanite fortified cities of the type described in the book of Joshua. In these scenes, the kings of the cities are shown with braziers making fiery offerings to their gods over the dead bodies of children on the city walls (exactly as is described of the king of Moab in 2 Kings 3:27). That these representations unquestionably depict Canaanite child sacrifice is the conclusion of the scholarly publication of the Egyptian scenes (A. Spalinger, "A Canaanite Ritual Found in Egyptian Reliefs," *Journal of the Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities* 8 [1978]:47-60).

But the importance of archaeology for biblical study goes far beyond the fact that it confirms many aspects of the biblical record. Equally important for believers is the better understanding of the Scriptures that archaeology can provide in giving us a detailed picture of what life was like in Old and New Testament times and sometimes even helping us to gain a better understanding of specific things the Bible says.

Case Study: The Dead Sea Scrolls

No archaeological discovery pertaining to the Bible is more famous than the Dead Sea Scrolls. In 1947, shepherds stumbled on a cave at Qumran in a remote and dry mountainous area on the western side of the Dead Sea. Over the next few years, a number of similar

caves were found in the same area. In the caves, archaeologists discovered hundreds of ancient Hebrew documents including fragments of 190 biblical scrolls dating from as early as the third century BC to around the time of Jesus.

Although a complete scroll of the book of Isaiah was found among the manuscripts, most of them were fragmentary – containing only parts of biblical books. Nevertheless, almost every book in the Old Testament was represented. This biblical material from over two thousand years ago has proven to be of immense value to biblical scholars. Perhaps its greatest contribution has been to our understanding of the transmission of the biblical text. In most cases the Dead Sea Scrolls exhibit minimal differences between their wording and that of the Hebrew Masoretic Text produced a thousand years later and used as the basis of our Old Testament today. Even where there are differences, they are usually very minor and do not affect the meaning of what is said.

On the other hand, in a number of cases the scrolls have helped clarify difficult scriptures. This is because they sometimes record words that were lost or changed over time in the versions of the Hebrew Bible available to us. An example of this is found in Isaiah 53:11. Speaking of a messianic figure, the Masoretic Text of this verse reads: “After the suffering of his soul, he will see and be satisfied.” In reading this verse we can only wonder “What will he see?” as the word “see” has no object. However, in this section of Isaiah preserved in several scrolls found at Qumran, verse 11 contains the missing information: “After the suffering of his soul, he will see light.” As it happens, the ancient Greek Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Bible also has the word “light” – showing that this is very likely the original reading of this verse.

When it comes to the New Testament, the Dead Sea Scrolls contain no references to Jesus or the early Christians, but they help us understand the world in which Jesus lived, and in some cases they show how Jesus and Christianity fit into that world. For

example, a similar list of miracles appears in both the New Testament Gospels and the Dead Sea Scroll known as the Messianic Apocalypse (4Q521). These lists of miracles are both doubtless based on Isaiah chapters 35 and 61. But in Luke 7:21–22 and Matthew 11:4–5, Jesus mentions these miracles to the disciples of John the Baptist as evidence that he (Jesus) is the Messiah, and in the Dead Sea Messianic Apocalypse (written some 150 years before the Gospel of Luke), in a context speaking of the Messiah, the Lord is said to be the one who will perform these miracles. Clearly, Jesus was offering evidence of his messiahship that the Jewish world of his time was expecting.

In ways like these, the Dead Sea Scrolls provide examples of how archaeology has helped us better understand difficult sections of the Bible and throw additional light on others. Using a good modern translation of the Bible like the English Standard Version or the New International Version or a modern revision of the King James Bible (such as the New King James Version, or King James 2000 Version) often allows us to profit from information from the Dead Sea Scrolls that is given in their footnotes to biblical verses.

13. HISTORY

The area of history is a broad one which includes not only historical and chronological facts, but also, in its widest sense, details of climate, geography, topography and other factors that influenced the history of an area. Actual written accounts detailing individuals and events are, of course, of the greatest importance, as a number of these written historical sources have confirmed or clarified things mentioned in the Bible. The writings of the first-century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, for example, include references to both John the Baptist and Jesus, as well as Jesus' brother James and various events mentioned in the New Testament.

Also, history can often “flesh out” biblical accounts so that we can better understand the references that are being made. Luke 14:28-31 records an incident in which Jesus gave two parables: about an individual who began to build a great tower but was unable to finish it, and a king who started a war with a neighboring country but did not count the cost and was not able to complete his military campaign.

It is thought that these two stories are based on real historical events that Jesus' hearers would have known about – a failed building project begun by the Roman governor Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem, and a failed military campaign of the Jewish king Herod Antipater, also known as Antipas (c. 21 BC-AD 39).

According to Josephus, Antipas declared war on the neighboring king, Aretas, without proper planning, and his army was routed by the larger forces of the other king – something that would have been “headline news” in Jesus' day. Jesus referred to a number of other events of his time, such as the collapse of the tower of Siloam in Jerusalem which killed a number of people (Luke 13:4).

Like archaeology, history sometimes enables us to go much further than just confirming historical details and events mentioned

in the Bible; it can actually add to our understanding of specific verses in Scripture. Consider a single example – the famous Parable of the Pounds or Talents given by Jesus (Luke 19:12-27 and also Matthew 25:14-30). In this parable, Jesus spoke of a nobleman who went away into a far country to “receive his kingdom” (Luke 19:1), so most people presume that the parable is talking about Jesus’ own ascension and later promised return.

But there are details of the parable that suggest this meaning is unlikely. The parable describes how the nobleman’s “citizens hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, ‘We do not want this man to reign over us’” (Luke 19:14 ESV), and when the nobleman returned he commanded that his enemies be brought and slaughtered before him (Luke 19:27). These details certainly do not seem to fit with Jesus himself (for example, how could the people send a delegation after him?), but history can perhaps help us here.

We know that during much of the lifetime of Jesus, Judea was ruled under the Romans by Herod Archelaus (23 BC-c.AD 18), the son of Herod the Great in whose time Jesus was born. After the death of Herod the Great, Archelaus was to rule over Judea, but due to great popular unrest, Archelaus traveled to Rome to have his kingdom confirmed by the Emperor. Then, according to Josephus, Archelaus returned to Jerusalem where he slaughtered many of those who had not supported him while he was gone.

These events were well known to the people of Jesus’ day and when we consider this historical background, we see that the Parable of the Pounds takes on new meaning. The nobleman-turned-king in the story is said to be a ruthless man who demands interest on his money (Luke 19:23). The Hebrew Bible prohibited taking interest from fellow Israelites (Exodus 22:25), and we also see individuals being warned against overvaluing money in Jesus’ own teaching (Luke 16:13; etc.), so this detail of the parable hardly fits the person of Jesus, either.

But if the Parable of the Pounds was in fact modeled on the reign of the hated and brutal Archelaus (rather than being an exhortation to “use our talents,” as is often thought), it may rather be seen as a condemnation of the world’s way of ruling. After reminding his hearers in this parable how the rich and the powerful of the world rule over people in arrogance and brutality, Jesus proceeded to enter Jerusalem with the fanfare of a returning ruler (Luke 19:28-38). But Jesus returned humbly, and rather than slaughtering his enemies, he proceeded to die for them. So, seen through the lens of contemporary historical events, the Parable of the Pounds provides a profound contrast between the ways of this world and the way that Jesus taught and lived himself.

This is only one example of how history can sometimes not only help confirm events mentioned in the Bible, but also help us better understand what it says. We see another clear example of this in the following case study.

Case Study: Letters of Hope in Revelation

When we think of the book of Revelation, the first things that come to mind may be mysterious symbols and apocalyptic imagery. But one of its most significant characteristics can be missed if we do not look at the historical situation in which the book was written: a consistent message of hope to the persecuted church.

Persecution is described in all parts of Revelation – from its opening chapters to the final attack on the New Jerusalem – and the historical context of Revelation provides a reason for this. John’s apocalyptic writing seems to date to the AD 90’s, during the reign of the Emperor Diocletian. The persecution of Christians reached a climactic level at this time – many Christians were stripped of authority, imprisoned, executed, and their property confiscated. John himself was banished to the Island of Patmos.

When we see this historical background clearly, we begin to grasp the importance of the message of hope-despite-persecution within Revelation. We see it in John's personal introductory words to his fellow believers: "I, John, both your brother and companion in the tribulation and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ" (Revelation 1:9 NKJV) – words which set the tone for the whole book.

We especially see this theme of endurance under persecution in the letters to the Seven Churches in Revelation's second and third chapters. The letters are written in the form of imperial edicts, but John makes it clear that Jesus is the King of kings (and emperors) to whom we must listen. Just as Imperial Roman edicts proclaimed, for example: "Hear what Diocletian says ...," so the letters of Revelation all include "hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Revelation 2:7; etc.).

Just as imperial edicts would often say "I know what you have done" in either praise or criticism of their recipients, so the seven letters repeatedly stress Christ's words: "I know your works." The letter to Smyrna, for example, makes this theme clear: "I know your works, tribulation, and poverty ... Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer... and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Revelation 2:9-10 NKJV). Once we see Revelation's historical setting, we can learn much about persecution and hope from the book's seven letters. Consider two fascinating facts in this regard:

The letters to the Seven Churches – *except for Sardis and Laodicea* – all contain encouragement to persevere in the face of persecution. Sardis and Laodicea are the two churches where persecution is not mentioned and are also the two churches that are said to be either asleep or blind.

Conversely, each church is given some correction – *apart from Smyrna and Philadelphia* – which we know historically were the two most persecuted churches. Of the seven churches, the most

fiercely persecuted congregations are the only ones praised without reproach.

These facts remind us never to presume persecution comes upon believers because they are not sincere or righteous enough. If anything, Revelation indicates the opposite – that churches that do not experience persecution of any kind may not be spiritually active or alive, while persecuted groups are often far more devout.

This underlying and unifying message in Revelation's letters to the churches is made alive for us by seeing them against their historical background. History helps us to understand the depth of the great hope offered by the letters – that God sees Christians' trials and promises that whatever is taken from them by persecution will be returned in the kingdom at an infinitely greater level – whether relationships, positions, possessions, or life itself.

14. CULTURE

The cultural background of the Bible includes the traditions, customs and beliefs of the time in which the biblical books were written. This kind of cultural information may be revealed by archaeological or historical sources – or even in other ways such as oral tradition – so it can be considered a separate area of knowledge that can often help us more clearly understand things that are said in the Scriptures. In this chapter we will consider examples of this from both the Old and New Testaments.

Old Testament Examples

In Genesis 15:9-21 we find the story of God sealing his covenant with Abram (Abraham) around 2000 BC by means of animal sacrifices. In response to Abram's request for a sign that God would fulfill his pledge to give him the Promised Land (vs. 8), God instructed him to take various animals and sacrifice them in a seemingly peculiar manner. After killing the animals, Abram divided them into halves, placing them on the ground in such a way that someone could walk between the halves of the carcasses. The narrative then states: "When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram" (Genesis 15:17-18).

Many biblical commentaries do not understand this event and suggest that it symbolized such things as the "furnace of affliction" Israel would suffer in Egypt, but there is no reason to make such a symbolic connection, especially one so stretched. The real meaning of the event can be clearly seen from what is known of ancient Near Eastern royal land grant treaties in which an agreement was made between two unequal parties – one of higher status and one of

lower status – and in which land was granted to the ruler of lower status on condition of faithfulness to the higher king.

This kind of treaty was concluded by a ritual in which sacrificed animals were divided in half, and in some cases the participants to the treaty walked between the halves of the animals as a way to seal the agreement made by them. This legal procedure of the world in which Abram lived is central to understanding the story of Genesis 15. Perhaps Abram walked between the animal halves when he arranged them on the ground, as did God – represented by the burning torch which “passed between the pieces.”

Another, much later (c. 590 BC) but clearly parallel biblical example of this ritual in the time of King Zedekiah also involved an animal being killed, cut into two pieces, and then individuals passing between the divided pieces (Jeremiah 34:8-22 and note vss. 15, 18-19). In fact, the Hebrew Bible speaks of covenants not as being “made” but as being “cut” (Hebrew *karat*), and the ancient practice of cutting and separating sacrificial animals explains the background to this expression.

So in this example we see cultural background not only explaining an event in the Bible that we might not otherwise understand, but also showing us God’s willingness to work through the laws and customs of the time in which he dealt with individuals. It’s an interesting insight – God not only gives laws, but is sometimes willing to utilize the laws and customs of his human family in order to fulfill his plans for them.

New Testament Examples

The New Testament also contains many examples of biblical statements that are better understood with cultural background. This is especially true in many of the recorded words of Jesus.

In the parable that Jesus told of the “unsuitably clothed wedding guest” (Matthew 22:8-14), the king who holds a great wedding feast sees a guest not wearing proper wedding attire and commands that the guest be thrown out of the celebration. We know that in ancient

Judea, as in many other ancient and modern cultures, guests wore their finest clothes to a wedding. It showed the guests' respect for the host and it also honored the host by showing that his or her friends were well dressed – and thus legitimately at the banquet of a great person or even a king.

Throughout many areas of the ancient Near East, the host (especially a king) might also present expensive garments as gifts to those attending a wedding or other festival so that they might be suitably attired (see Genesis 45:22; Judges 14:12; 2 Kings 5:22; 10:22). This seems likely to have been the situation in Jesus' parable, as the guests were all gathered from the streets without opportunity to prepare themselves and to put on fine clothes.

Although, like many parables, the story does not directly state the point it is making, it seems clear that the guests' "clothes" symbolize their spiritual condition. The problematic guest apparently considered his own clothes good enough instead of changing them for the clothing (symbolizing true righteousness) that the king provided (see also Zechariah 3:3-5; Isaiah 61:10).

Sometimes cultural background like this can help us better see the context of events or statements in the Bible. Jesus' words, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink" (John 7:37) and "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12) are among his most famous sayings, but we understand their effect on their original hearers much better when we realize their cultural context – that they were spoken on two specific occasions within the great Feast of Tabernacles festival celebrated by the Jews in Jerusalem (John 7:2).

On the last day of this festival, the Jews performed an elaborate ceremony in which water was brought from a nearby spring with great rejoicing and was offered on the altar of the temple. It was on that day that Jesus told his followers "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink." On the following day the Jewish worshippers celebrated a spectacular festival of lights with many lamps being lit to illuminate the temple. It was on that day that Jesus told the crowds "I am the light of the world." In both cases, his statements would have been made much more striking and

relevant to his hearers because of the cultural events happening when he spoke them. Understanding details like these helps us to see the word pictures Christ painted in his teaching in the way the people of his day would have seen them.

Culture and the Kingdom

Consider two final examples from the Gospels where we read that Jesus spoke of the “kingdom of God” and of the “kingdom of Heaven.” Some claim these are different kingdoms, but a little cultural background can help us see that is not the case.

The expression “kingdom of God” occurs almost seventy times in ten different New Testament books, but the term “kingdom of heaven” occurs only in the Gospel of Matthew. Looking at the background to Matthew’s Gospel, we find it was written to a primarily Jewish audience and thus many of the terms he uses were ones preferred by the Jews themselves. Because of their understanding of the third of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:7), many of the Jewish people avoided the use of the name of God when they could, so it was natural for Matthew to frequently call the “kingdom of God” the “kingdom of heaven,” in the same way we might speak of the “White House” as a way to refer to the U.S. president or his administration.

We can check that this background fact is the explanation for the two different names for the “kingdom of God” that are used in the Gospels because Mark and Luke, when they are reporting things Jesus said, usually use the term “kingdom of God” and Matthew uses “kingdom of heaven” in his account of the same statements (compare Matthew 18:3 with Mark 10:14 and Luke 18:16; etc.). There are a very few exceptions to this situation where Matthew himself uses both the expression “kingdom of heaven” and “kingdom of God,” and these actually help prove the point we are making. In the story of Jesus’ conversation with the rich young ruler, for example, Jesus said: “Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven ... it is easier

for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God” (Matthew 19:23-24). Here, “kingdom of heaven” is used in verse 23, but “kingdom of God” in verse 24 in almost identical statements. This shows that the two expressions mean the same thing and disproves the arguments some have made that the two terms represent two different kingdoms.

Cultural details such as the ones mentioned in the examples we have looked at so far in this chapter can not only deepen our understanding of the Scriptures, but they can also help us to understand biblical references that we might otherwise not understand at all – as we see in the following case study.

Case Study: Biblical Body Language

There is a language you can learn in order to better understand many verses in the Bible. That language is not Greek, Hebrew, or Aramaic – it is simply the “language” of gestures and actions we call “body language.” We are all familiar with body language in our own cultures and absorb it subconsciously as we grow up. We learn from a very early age that if a parent stands with fists on hips as he or she is about to speak to us that we are probably in trouble! As we go through life we routinely “read” the gestures and postures of others without thinking about it, but those same clues are a very real part of our understanding of what is happening in our interpersonal relationships.

In some cases, the body language mentioned in the Bible is similar or identical to that found in many modern cultures. For example, the act of bowing before important individuals or before God mentioned so often in the Bible is perfectly understandable to us today, and even more subtle gesture expressions make sense to us, as when the book of Proverbs tells us that “Whoever winks with their eye is plotting perversity; whoever purses their lips is bent on evil” (Proverbs 16:30).

The Bible draws attention to many of these non-verbal forms of expression – especially those involving the hands or feet. For example, the book of Ezekiel records God commanding the prophet Ezekiel to gesture by clapping his hands and stomping his feet regarding sinful Israel (Ezekiel 6:11). Such gestures were commonly used in both ancient Israel and the nations surrounding it. The book of Job mentions pagan worshippers of the sun and moon gesturing by kissing their hands to bless their gods (Job 31:26-28), and in both the Old and New Testaments we see that in blessing a group of people it was common to lift the hands toward them as the blessing was spoken (Leviticus 9:22; Luke 24:50).

But there are some things we should remember in understanding the body language mentioned in the Bible. First, we sometimes find different body gestures being used with the same meaning. The book of Genesis gives several examples of oaths being sworn by a person placing his hand under another's thigh or hip – as Abraham's steward is said to have done in promising that he would get a wife for Isaac from among Abraham's relatives (Genesis 24:2, 9), and as Joseph did in swearing not to bury his father Jacob in Egypt (Genesis 47:29-31). But later in the Old Testament references to individuals taking an oath usually involve raising a hand toward heaven (Deuteronomy 32:40; Daniel 12:7; etc.), and in the book of Ezekiel God himself is said to take an oath by raising his hand in this way (Ezekiel 20:5, 15, 23).

Another factor to keep in mind is that many societies assign unique meanings to expressions of this form of language, and we cannot always assume that a body language "signal" means the same thing to those in other places or times as it does to us. The gesture of clapping is a good example of this. We usually understand clapping the hands together positively – as applause. In biblical times we see that same meaning of the gesture as applause (2 Kings 11:12) and praise (Psalm 47:1), but clapping was also used to signify negative reactions such as anger (Numbers 24:10), revulsion (Ezekiel 22:13), and even contempt or derision (Job 27:23). So when we read of people clapping in a Bible verse

(compare for example, Ezekiel 6:11 and 25:6), we should realize that we need to look at the different possible meanings of this gesture to see which best fits the context.

Many biblical gestures have multiple meanings and need to be understood in context. The gesture of throwing dust in the air onto oneself or others was used by those who were grieving (Joshua 7:6; etc.), but also as a gesture indicating scorn or anger, as when the man Shimei did this against David along with cursing him (2 Samuel 16:13). The same gesture is seen in the New Testament when an angry mob responded to Paul's defense by crying out and tossing dust into the air (Acts 22:22-23).

In a similar way, removing one's shoes or sandals was sometimes a gesture of respect, just as Moses was commanded to do this at the burning bush (Exodus 3:5) and Joshua in the presence of the angel of the Lord (Joshua 5:15). But removing shoes could also be a sign of grief (2 Samuel 15:30), of disrespect (Deuteronomy 25:6-10), or even of sealing an agreement (Ruth 4:7-8).

In the New Testament, bodily gestures and expressions are frequently noted in the Gospels, and this is especially true – as we might perhaps expect – in the Gospel of Luke the physician. But body language appears in some form or other in most books of the Bible and looking out for it and learning to “read” it correctly can often help us to better understand what is happening in the narrative or to notice points that the biblical writers especially wanted to stress.

15. TOOLS FOR LOOKING AT THE BACKGROUND

A number of Bible publishers produce “study bibles” that contain explanatory background notes and articles that can often be helpful. The New International Version *Archaeological Study Bible* and English Standard Version *Archaeology Study Bible*, as well as the New International Version and New King James Version *Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible* are good examples, with helpful information tied to their respective versions of the Bible.

There are also numerous Bible dictionaries, handbooks, and atlases that give varying amounts of background information that sheds light on the biblical text, but these can vary widely in thoroughness, and it is sometimes difficult to find the information specifically needed in books of this type. Among the best compact yet detailed background resources are *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* by John Walton, *et al.* (IVP Academic, 2000) and *New Testament* by Craig Keener (IVP Academic, 2014), which are accessibly written by trained scholars and are generally very good.

There are also some very worthwhile books on individual aspects of Bible background. For example, looking at the Jewish background to the life and teachings of Jesus can be particularly profitable. A few of the useful books in this area (from more accessible to more scholarly) are: *Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus* by Anne Spangler and Lois Tverberg (Zondervan, 2009), *New Light on the Difficult Words of Jesus: Insights from His Jewish Context* by David Bivin (En-Gedi, 2005), and *Jesus the Jewish Theologian* by Brad Young (Hendrickson, 1995.)

But where availability and cost preclude use of resources such as these, there is a great deal of information available on the internet. Care must be taken, of course, in choosing and using sites that are produced by individuals and groups that select sound material. This is especially important in the areas of biblical archaeology and

history, where many internet sites lean toward the sensational with coverage of supposed archaeological finds “proving” the Bible, but which often have no basis in fact. A very good option in this area is the website of the respected *Biblical Archaeology Society* www.biblicalarchaeology.org. The society’s website has a great many well-researched and reliably reported articles and features on biblical history and archaeology from its publications – with more than 9,000 articles from over 40 years of *Biblical Archaeology Review* (1975 to present), 20 years of *Bible Review* (1985 to 2005 complete) and 8 years of *Archaeology Odyssey* (1998 to 2006 complete). The site also carries a very helpful annual summary of the most important finds in biblical archaeology for the past year.

Despite the relative wealth of available information on the background to the Gospels, Acts and epistles, there is less easily accessible information on the background to the Old Testament. Given this situation, rather than trying to read dozens of individual books on the long history and many cultures mentioned in the Old Testament period, it can often be more productive to simply research specific OT background topics online. This is relatively simple to do by using an online search-engine and searching “topic + biblical world” or “topic + ancient Near East” (where “topic” is, of course, whatever subject you wish to research). Again, one must be careful to try to evaluate the trustworthiness of the sources one finds doing this kind of online search (aim for sources from mainstream rather than “special interest” sites wherever possible), but the same is just as true of printed information, of course!

Naturally, studying background information – just as making endless word or context studies – is no substitute for simply reading the Bible. But when time allows, simply searching a few terms or topics relevant to sections of the Bible we are reading in our personal Bible study can often provide helpful archaeological, historical, and cultural background that makes the biblical narrative much more real and understandable to us.

CONCLUSION:

Taking Steps to Understand the Bible

Successful understanding of the Bible involves three basic actions on our part – observation, interpretation, and application.

The first action, observation, consists of finding out what a passage says and involves the principles we looked at in Step One in this book – working with the text until we have a clear grasp of what is being said.

The second action, interpretation, involves coming to see what the passage means. This may involve all of the steps given in this book – looking at the text, context, and background as necessary to understand as well as we can what the original writer intended.

In working through this process, we should always keep in mind, however, that the evidence of the text is most important, that of context less so, and that of background least of all. Remembering this will help keep our understanding on solid ground as we follow the principle that the Bible is its own best interpreter, and the simplest and most natural explanation of a Biblical text is always the best interpretation.

The third and final action we must take to complete our study and understanding of any biblical passage is application – our response to what the passage is telling us. This may involve thought and, in some cases, prayerful meditation on our part until we have a clear plan in mind regarding what we are going to do about what we have learned. Application of what we learn is always a key part of understanding the Bible – there are occasions when we only come to fully understand some things the Bible teaches when we actually put them into practice!

The main thing to always remember is that despite the seemingly difficult passages we may occasionally encounter in our study of the Scriptures, with the right attitude, good techniques, and a little work, we *can* understand the Bible!

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