

How to read the Bible for All it's worth

Other people have written 'How to read ...' books (I recommend for example, Joel Green on the Gospels and Prophecy. both IVP & my copies are 1980's. Also, Kenneth Bailey and Chris Wright – Recommended Reading). This is a very brief introduction.

Once, a long time ago, I heard someone say of the Bible, "*It's just a book, start at the beginning and go to the end, simple*" Perhaps not the most helpful advice. Those who have tried it, even long-time Christians don't find that easy, and that's mainly because the Bible is not 'just a book'. It is, as we know, a collection of books, written by different people over a long period of time and from different perspectives. Even the individual books show evidence of collective authorship or editing. So why do Christians say it is God's Word; why do some claim it is 'inspired' and that every word must be honoured? Why do some insist that we must read it 'simply and literally' giving every word the same value? A friend said to me "*We just have to read it off the page*", well, why not?

That's a lot of "why's" and sadly though the answers are not simple it doesn't mean they are impossible. Perhaps the best way to start is by answering a slightly different question, what actually is the Bible? At its simplest it is a '*collection of books, written by different people over a long period of time and from different perspectives*'. It includes history but it is not your standard history text book, and it is most definitely not a science textbook, although that doesn't mean it makes stuff up! One of the key things about it is that it rings true to life: all those dysfunctional people!

What else is in it, what are the 'Biblical genres'? In modern media terms, including films, we'd think of, for example, Fantasy, Romance, Comedy, Historical Drama etc. The Bible has Poetry, Wisdom, Narrative (history), Prophecy, Apocalyptic, and Letters (epistles). Don't worry this isn't a lecture on all those, we just need to recognise their place in the overall scheme of things, they all 'do a job' of telling God's story

One of our problems understanding what's going on in our reading is that the genres don't stay in one place. We know that the Psalms are poetry, so that's OK, but we get poetry in other places too. In some modern translations the editors have helpfully; and hopefully correctly; identified those other places and formatted the text accordingly. 'Wisdom' seems to keep itself largely to itself, (always did, always will!) but let's not be fooled, it does pop up in other places.

Letters seem straightforward except when they 'do' theology, we'll come to them. But, how do we separate prophecy from apocalyptic from history and vice versa? The key is to be sure we are always aware of context. Anytime you hear someone quoting a text, be on your guard. It has been well said that 'a text without a context is a pretext for a proof text'. Without a context any text is virtually useless. So, what do we mean by 'context'?

The first things to ask regarding any text are, who is writing, when and to whom? In other words, what is the historical, cultural and religious setting for the words we are reading? (And we have to bear in mind that, unless we are a privileged minority we are reading translations – which are always interpretive – of translations. Even the privileged don't have access to anything remotely original).

There's an important point to be made here. Some critics use the above to claim that the Bible is untrustworthy. They say, correctly, that it sometimes contradicts itself and sometimes tells the same story different ways. I've spent some time in criminal courts as a social worker and, if you talk to police they will tell you they are usually suspicious of witness evidence that is 'too similar'. Witness a traffic accident from opposite sides of the street and what you see will be different. That too, is the way history works; people write what they see and hear and it is through understanding their context that we will understand why they write and what it means.

There's a simple example in Paul's short letter to Philemon. Consisting of just 25 verses the central element, verses 8 to 21, have been claimed by some as Paul's attack/defence of slavery, (It can be read either way but that isn't its point). As always in the pastoral letters the theology sits there in the background. Paul writes to Philemon about his runaway slave, Onesimus, who has also become a follower of 'The Way'. Under Roman law, Onesimus as Philemon's personal property and as a runaway, has no rights; Philemon can kill him if he wishes. As to Roman law, he is a slave, as to the gospel, Onesimus is now a brother of both Paul and Philemon.

So the context includes – Onesimus, a runaway slave of Philemon, who has encountered Paul and the gospel and has become a follower. Philemon, who is Paul's friend and co-worker, and is now presented with the challenge, is it to be Roman law or Godly grace? Law, Grace, Gospel. There's a further element of context that always fascinates me as I read the Bible, why is it there? Why, in particular, did this letter survive? What seems to be a very personal, a very singular (it's about one person and one situation) letter has somehow made it into the canon of scripture, those writings which the early church decided it was important should be shared among us all. Why this letter, this phrase, this incident, why?

Some of the more problematic parts of scripture are those that deal with actual history and the meaning of prophecy. Let's deal with history first.

What do we mean by 'actual history'? Norman Davies, at the time professor at London University, wrote of, '*... the impossible task of the historian. ... The historian, like the camera, always lies, ... A large number of shots taken from different angles, and with different lenses, filters and film, can collectively reduce the gross selectivity of the single shot*'. What is true of the camera and the historian is as true for the Biblical writers. If the first 'exposure' we have of the Bible is inevitably a partial history that doesn't mean it is untrue, it does mean we should seek a broader context. An example may be helpful.

Why do the books Ezra-Nehemiah make such a big deal over 'marrying out'? The context is the return from exile which began in 538 BC. If the timings are correct Ezra's return took place about 80 years later, in 458 BC. Among other things he is told, '*the people have not separated themselves ...the holy seed has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands ...*'. (Ezra 9). Similarly, Nehemiah some 25 years later (433 BC) condemns mixed marriages, (Nehemiah 13). The reference in Neh. 13 verse 1 is to Deuteronomy chapter 23 verse 3 to 6, where Ammonites and Moabites to the 10th generation may not become part of the assembly of Israel.

Here we have a problem; Ezra 9 includes as prohibited the Egyptians, but they are specifically *included* in Deut. 23 verse 7 along with the Edomites. That isn't the only difficulty. Even a casual

reading of the Old Testament (OT) reveals that Israel was multi-ethnic. Among those ‘marrying out’ we find Judah, Joseph, Moses and David, whose great-grandmother was Ruth the Moabitess.

How does this help us in seeing the broader context? With all the above in mind we ask, what was the problem that Ezra and Nehemiah believed they were dealing with? Answer; assimilation, as in earlier times, was accompanied by lessening commitment to Yahweh as Israel’s one God. Where it was to Yahweh, as with Ruth, as with Zipporah the Midianite, assimilation was not a problem. Where it led away from creational monotheism to paganism it was wholly unacceptable. With the punishment of exile still fresh in their memory, with many who had still not returned despite freedom to do so, the risk of offending God was too great. That is **some** of the context for those uncomfortable texts.

It is obvious then that context must include the whole of the Bible. Better, it is the whole text plus whatever we can glean from outside sources. We know some of the dates that I’ve used above not because they are in the Bible, they aren’t; but because names and events in the Bible can be tied to external history.

Prophecy? that’s easy, it tells us about the future – Not! If we read prophecy as if it’s God’s equivalent to fortune-telling we are skirting with disaster. Even where it is prognostication it is almost always based on ‘if’. Certain things will happen dependent on behaviour. The OT in particular is littered with examples. The prophetic from Amos to John is always intended to bring about change. It is always God’s intent to draw people close not to drive them away. Distance, we see from as early as Genesis 4, is a function of human fault, human action in opposition to God.

Context is vital if we are to understand prophecy. What is God, through His prophet, wanting to achieve, reminding ourselves of the important question for anything in the Bible, “*why is it here?*”? Why was it remembered, why written down, why thought sufficiently important to be preserved for future generations? I believe that inspiration was and is at work at all those levels, including hiding the Dead Sea Scrolls until we had learned how to save and read them.

Understanding metaphor is also vital to understanding prophecy. Too often present day Christians re-interpret 3000 year old metaphors as if they were really meant for us. Before we can even think of applying them to our situation we must try to see them through the eyes of those first hearers. And since the prophets were probably the nearest thing they had those centuries ago to ‘media’ we could start by thinking how we react to ours. What are the things that catch our attention?

As much to the point, seeing that they were talking to a people who didn’t seem to want to listen, what are the things that leap out at us even when we’re trying hard not to pay attention? The simplest way to understand that is to take a look at the most popular media whether it is paper, magazine, radio, TV or on-line. Eye-catching headlines, not always matched by the article content, is what sells. If it works for us, why would it be different for God’s prophets? True, they didn’t have to choose among innumerable news channels, but equally, they could easily walk away from a ‘Jeremiad’. Who wants to listen to a street preacher telling us we’re doomed? Read prophecy keeping all these things in mind and we have just a chance we may learn from it.

The letters are easy, aren't they, until we actually read them. Even Philemon, above, requires and benefits from careful study. In the main the letters seem to be written to deal with pastoral issues or questions. The recipients have asked for advice or, in some cases, are given it whether they like it or not! Some are more general, like James and Peter and Hebrews, while others are quite specific such as those to the Corinthians and Thessalonians. Although pastoral they are always theological. How does that work?

Once again context is important, what is the cultural, historical and faith context in which the letter is written? Paul in particular applies his understanding of God's gospel to the culture of the people he's addressing. It's why we should be careful not to 'read out' from what he 'writes in'. Most often Paul is giving pastoral advice to a specific, and often he may have believed, a temporary situation. Not only did they pray, "*Lord, Come quickly*", it seems certain they expected He would. So Paul response is to the immediate situation and its cultural setting. It's the 'here and now' not our future he has in mind.

So, while there is theology there, we must be careful how we read it. Then what about Romans? Romans is rather different as is the letter to the Hebrews, and Revelation, while framed as a letter, is quite clearly exceptional. Reading them carefully with due consideration for their human context; John in exile and under surveillance and Paul hoping to visit Rome for the first time on his way to Spain, is the way to go. Outside the letter we know nothing about the writer to the Hebrews, but we do know that the early church was Hebrew (Jewish).

There is an aspect of genre I alluded to but I've kept almost to the end; story. Isn't that the same as 'narrative'? Yes and no. There's another, complicated-sounding word that covers it, 'meta-narrative', the over-arching story within which all the little stories; the wisdom, the promises, the poetry, the letters, even the failures, make sense. The beauty of the Bible, read properly, read fully in its many contexts is that it 'rings true'; there is a melody and a harmony that work together.

When we have read the Old Testament through the eyes of those who thought, wrote, heard and preserved it, we who claim to follow Jesus now view it through New Testament eyes. The New is interpreting the Old as is evident from the frequency with which it both quotes and re-interprets it. There is hardly a New Testament chapter without at the very least an allusion to the Old Testament, (Revelation has no direct quotations but is packed with allusion).

If Jesus is not God's fulfilment of the Old Covenant (Testament) promises then the Evangelists, (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) are mistaken as are also Paul, Peter, James, John, and the writer of the letter to the Hebrews. If they are mistaken we of all people are to be pitied.

To God alone be Glory in His Church.