

Personal Bible Study – 2

1. Literary Styles

A. Stylistic diversity: a mark of divine origin.

1. The Scriptures were written over a long period of time (1600 years) amid various circumstances and unto differing objectives. Some books are historical narrative, poetry, prophecy, law, biography, personal letters and highly figurative apocalyptic literature.
2. These literary forms were recognizable methods of human communication. God did not use special, heavenly language or style. He expressed Himself in the most understandable manner to His human audience.
3. By necessity we are students of literature and language. We must account for these styles if we are to understand the Scriptures properly. The methods of understanding historical narrative will be ineffective in studying Revelation.

B. OT styles:

1. Law and history – These are the most straightforward styles of OT literature. They usually deal with who, what, when, where and why in a narrative format. Some of this material overlaps (Kings/Chronicles; Leviticus/Numbers). Genealogical records can be tedious. But all of this data is a reflection of what God was unfolding through the nation of Israel.
2. Poetry – The poetic books – Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon are not poems per se. Job is more of a historical narrative; Psalms is more like poetry; Proverbs is full of pithy, concise truisms; Ecclesiastes is one man's reflections upon the essence and meaning of human life; and the Song of Solomon is a love story. All these literary variables must be carefully considered if one is to gain the full benefit of study. (For example: many of the proverbs have been misunderstood by trying to make them absolute rather than general observations of cause and effect).
3. Prophecy – The prophetic books must be understood as far as possible in their historical setting. Many can be matched with the histories of Kings and Chronicles or Ezra and Nehemiah for background details. Conversely, the prophets shed light on the historical accounts which often give only a broad overview. Some of the prophets deal with Israel only, some Judah, and some both. Prophecies are made concerning not only the future of Israel but their neighbors and enemies as well. *NT interpretations are crucial to creating a framework of understanding of OT prophets.* Those who engage in wild prophetic speculations, like

premillennialists, ignore the plain explanations of Scripture. These are among those who are “*untaught and unstable*” and twist the Scriptures to their ruin (2 Pet 3:16).

4. Apocalyptic writing – This is the most unusual and difficult literary style of all for it communicates in symbols and bizarre, non-rational images to make its point. “Visions” are often involved in this process; the prophet is shown images which convey certain truths, usually for an audience undergoing severe trials. Parts of Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah and Joel are considered apocalyptic. An important concept in interpreting such writing is that plain, clear statements of truth cannot be set aside in favor of a speculative view based upon apocalyptic symbols. Unambiguous teaching must be a guide to that which is obscure.

C. NT styles:

1. Biography (gospels) – The four gospels can be loosely considered biographies as Jesus’ life and work is the main theme in each. However, each gospel has peculiar characteristics. The three gospels that overlap the most in information are Matthew, Mark and Luke.
 - a. John’s gospel contains a selection of Jesus’ miracles and concentrates its attention on Jesus’ work in Jerusalem and Judea.
 - b. Mark’s gospel is “action” oriented, more detailed and descriptive, and contains less of Jesus’ teaching than the others. It also seems aimed at a Gentile audience (see translation of Aramaic words [Mk 3:17; 5:41; 7:11, 34; 14:36] and explanation of Jewish custom [Mk 7:3-4; 14:12; 15:42]).
 - c. Matthew’s gospel has a rich, Jewish flavor as it cites the OT extensively and is filled with descriptions designed to arrest the attention of the Jews: son of David, the holy city, king of the Jews, the lost sheep of the house of Israel, etc.
 - d. Luke has both Jewish and Greek features and, together with Acts, presents an orderly, detailed history of both the life of Jesus and the follow-up work of His apostles. *It is most important to realize that the gospel writers are less interested in chronological order than how the events of Jesus’ life proved Him as the Messiah. If this is not recognized, confusion will result.*
2. History – As indicated, the book of Acts is Luke’s history of the development of the church under Jesus’ direction via the Holy Spirit. It is incredibly brief considering the scope of its subject matter. Acts is just that: “acts,” rather than “teachings.” While there is some reference to the content of the doctrine, it is mostly narrative of the early developments and the later work of Paul.
3. The Epistles. In the epistles God chose a unique way of communicating doctrinal instruction to His people.

- a. The epistles are personal letters from inspired men to either a church, churches in a region or a specific individual.
- b. In a sense they contain “doctrine in action,” teachings designed to inform, correct and guide real people facing real problems.
- c. This style of writing is very personal; it is often emotional and exhortational in addition to being instructive. *We accept that inspired instruction to others extends to all Christians for all time, providing the instruction is not circumstance-specific. This understanding lies at the heart of epistolary authority.*

2. The Background of a Book

- A. The major units of the Scriptures are the “books,” originally scrolls, which represent the actual revelation of God through an authorized source at a given point in time. Fundamental to an accurate knowledge of the Bible is discovering, as far as possible, who wrote to whom, when, and why.
- B. Authorship – Authorship of historical books is of less importance than prophecies or epistles. Acquaintance with the author can help with the historical context and shed brighter light upon the message. For example, the prophecies of Jeremiah which came in the days of Josiah, Jehoiakim and Zedekiah give details of Judah’s last years before Babylonian captivity. The chapters are in mixed chronological order, and when this is noted a clear picture emerges of Judah’s final plunge. The historical details in Jeremiah greatly supplement the sketchy information given in 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles.
- C. Recipients – To whom was a particular book addressed? What were their circumstances? What specific dangers or threats were they facing? Grappling with these questions will help clarify the content. For example, the first epistle to the Corinthians is primarily remedial, addressing many environmental factors bearing upon Christians in that extremely idolatrous and immoral city. One also notes that Paul refers to previous correspondence which has not been preserved (1 Cor 5:9; 7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1, etc.). This complicates an accurate interpretation of the message.

3. Discovering the General Theme of a Book

- A. Sometimes a Bible book will have a singular theme, and discovering that theme is the key which unlocks the meaning. Haggai, for instance, mainly concerns the rebuilding of the temple after the captivity. This short book complements the historical account of Ezra (3:8-6:18). While most remember that Jonah addresses the theme of preaching to the Ninevites, Nahum also addresses these Gentile people.
- B. In the NT, Hebrews addresses the folly of abandoning the new covenant of Christ for the old Mosaic system, as some Jewish converts were tempted to do. Thus most of this book draws a contrast between the respective covenants, and the term “bet-

ter” is a frequently recurring adjective describing the covenant of Christ. John’s general thrust in his first epistle is to attack a doctrine which denied the incarnation of Jesus, personal responsibility for sin and one’s obligation to his brother. Paul’s objective in Galatians is to expose the error of mixing elements of the old and new covenants, thus nullifying the concept of salvation by grace through faith.

C. Understanding the general theme(s) of each Bible book will greatly enhance our understanding of context and guard against misapplication of a passage.

Conclusion:

1. Studying the Bible requires applying literature skills. The fact that the Bible is of divine origin does not change the rules of language. We should not abandon clearly defined rules of communication and employ subjective, capricious standards that favor an illegitimate interpretation.
2. There is no shortcut to learning the Scriptures. It takes patience as we gradually accumulate knowledge and become better acquainted with the individual books that God has delivered through the ages.