

## HOW TO BETTER READ THE BIBLE FOR OURSELVES AND WITH OTHERS

### Start with the genre

The Bible is made up of 66 books, with various authors, writing in different literature types or genres. The genre of a piece of writing affects how we read and understand its content. And this happens all the time – we read a message from a friend differently to an email from a work colleague, for instance.

In the same way, we cannot read poetry in the Bible in the same way we read prophetic or apocalyptic or historical narrative genres. Instead, as we read God's Word we need to:

- Identify the genre of the passage;
- Note the features of this genre type and key principles for reading and interpreting that genre as part of God's Word.

Common genres in the Bible include: historical narrative, epistle (letter), poetry, prophecy, apocalyptic, gospel narrative, parables

### Know the context: historical and literary context

#### *Historical Context*

If we are concerned about carefully reading an ancient text within its context, then the historical context that our passage was written into matters. Knowing the historical context allows us to understand and interpret the author's words correctly in light of the history.

For instance, in Colossians 1:15 we learn that Jesus, the Son, is "the firstborn over all creation". Understanding the historical reality of the time provides a proper and complete insight into these words – for, as Paul wrote this, he was referring to a context where the firstborn son of a family received the full inheritance exclusively. So, what Paul is really saying here is that Jesus is the one who will inherit all of creation – not that he was somehow 'born' and not eternal.

Another example is in Mark 10, where children approach Jesus and, instead of letting his disciples push them away, Jesus embraces them – radical for a time where children were seen as insignificant by much of their culture.

To understand the historical context we need to ask questions like:

- What is the situation of the original hearers or writer of our passage?
- What people, places and events are referred to?
- Where does our passage fit on the historical timeline of the Bible?
- What are the political and cultural norms of the time of our passage?
- In what way does the subject matter of the passage shed light on the situation and how does the situation shed light on the subject matter?

#### *Literary Context*

Literary context involves understanding how the specific passage of the Bible we are reading fits into the surrounding passages (chapters before and after) and the rest of the book. To understand the literary context, we need to ask questions like:

- What is said in the chapters before and after our passage?
- What is the whole book about? (eg John 20:30-31 summarizes the gospel of John)
- What are some important themes, ideas or motifs in the book - are any of them picked up in our passage?

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One example of the way literary context enhances our understanding of the passage is from 1 Corinthians 13. In verses 4-7 we read about the nature of love – an often repeated Biblical passage at weddings. However, reading 1 Corinthians 12 and the first part of 13 perhaps better illuminates our understanding of these verses – Paul isn't technically speaking about a Biblical understanding of relationships but, rather, the exercise of gifts in the body of Christ.

### **Exegetical tools: what to look for in a passage**

As we read God's Word, there are certain features of the passage we want to identify to help our understanding of the main theme of the passage, as well as the flow of argument. This is the idea of exegesis – reading from the passage what God is speaking to us, rather than reading our own knowledge, ideas, thoughts, beliefs into it.

#### *Repeating words, phrases, ideas*

When a passage is littered with the word 'baptism' and other references to the practice, you would be right to think this is the big idea of the author. When we see either the same word, a variant, or similar words all of the same idea come up numerous times that is likely the main point of the writer and, therefore, of our passage.

#### *Connecting words, phrases, ideas*

Often Paul and other writers (especially letter writers in the NT) use connecting words or phrases to build an argument or show logic and demonstrate a flow for the reasoning of what they are saying. In Colossians 1:16, the verse begins with "For" meaning that, the reason Jesus is the inheritor of all things is 'because' of what Paul goes on to write in verse 16. Key connecting phrases in the Bible include: 'for', 'because', 'yet', 'but', 'so that', 'so'.

#### *Contrasting words, phrases, ideas*

Often Biblical authors want to draw contrasts between unifying themes to demonstrate their point – the life offered in the true human, Jesus, compared with the death offered in the first man, Adam (Romans 5). However, note this doesn't limit itself to words, 'life' and 'death', but also overall ideas.

#### *Theological words, phrases, ideas*

While some words or phrases seem so normal to us, for many non-Christians, certain words are either completely removed from their vocabulary ('justification' and 'righteousness' for example) or they have an entirely non-Biblical understanding of the word – 'sin' and 'holy' are particularly pertinent examples. However, we too need to ensure we have a full understanding of such words and phrases as well, in their Biblical meaning, which may require further work when we come across such words in our Bible reading.

#### *Commands (for specific Biblical figures and for us)*

Whether they are specifically in the passage for the original audience/hearers or for us today, commands are an important reality of much of the Bible. Identifying commands helps to see how God is calling His people to live and respond to His Word, including for us today.

#### Key/Legend for exegesis of Bible passages

- Circle any repeating words, phrases, ideas
- Put a box around connecting words, phrases, ideas
- Put brackets around contrasting words, phrases, ideas
- Draw a squiggly line under any theological words, phrases, ideas
- Highlight any commands in the passage