

# HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE BIBLE

Malvern Bible Chapel

February 13, 20, 2005

## *PART ONE: BASIC CONCEPTS*

But first, a necessary introductory statement for which no outline data is given: The subject is much larger than we can entertain in these two messages. I will try not to get bogged down with minor matters but---there is no guarantee this will not happen. The listeners will need to be contented with less than total discussions and at any time before or after the presentations, I will be glad to work with questions, suggestions, or advisorial statements. Please allow this caveat to condition your thinking.

### I. Getting started

- A. Our study begins in Acts 8:30 ff where Philip meets the official from the court of Ethiopia. The man is reading in Isaiah 53 (although at that time the text had not been divided into chapters and verses) and Philip asks if he understands what he is reading and the response amounts to a rhetorical question...."How can I unless..."
  - 1. We ask ourselves, "Why could he not understand?" and while this cannot be answered in detail we may assert the following concepts.
    - a. He did have the linguistic equivalence...that is not the problem.
    - b. But he did not know (apparently) the context of the nature of the prophetic emphasis.
    - c. And the language was obscure to him since it was describing a cultural process with which he was not familiar.
  - 2. How was he helped by Philip?
    - a. The central core of truth was opened to him regarding the Scripture
    - b. The implications of the redemptive message were made clear...as seen by the request for baptism.
  - 3. So if we are to understand the Bible we must be able to grip its context and intent and see how the central message of redemption is developed through them. A number of items will facilitate this.

## B. Some Practical Steps ---just stated, not developed

1. Lay aside misconceptions:
  - the Bible is such a big book
  - the Bible is hard to understand
  - the language of the Bible is obsolete
  - the Bible requires too much technical knowledge for the average Bible reader.
2. Then, get a grip on language usage:
  - a. *Literal language* is the best understanding of most speech...it means the words used accurately describe the subject or action mentioned. Cooper's rule says..."When the plain words of Scripture make common sense, seek no other sense. Therefore take every word at its primary meaning unless the immediate context in the light of related passages suggests another meaning." Literal language does allow the use of speech figures and illustrations.
  - b. Other language expressions are allegorical (sometimes called "spiritual" or "mystical", typical, as well as letterism, a concreted form of literal language.
  - c. And read the Bible as you would any book for an initial encounter. Read it before coming to a deep study of it. Later you will want to read it meditatively and prayerfully remembering the truth of 1 Corinthians 2:9-16. Do not imagine you must master every word before going on, but read, pray, and look to the Spirit of God for help. Talk with others and share with them the blessing of your reading. There is a lot more to this but.....

## **II, Very quickly, What is the Bible?**

### A. The simple facts:

1. It is a book given by God through human writers led by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:20, et al)
2. As such it is a history of God's work in creation, and of His establishing man in a relationship with Him and mankind in general while being a revelation of God's plan and work..

3. It is a guide to enable us to know redemption--peace with God, that is, establishing a relationship on the ground of truth while informing us of the will and purposes of God.
  4. It is a source of material to prosper us in worship and the enjoyment of living with God.
- B. In this light we say the Bible is perspicuous....that it is clear and may be understood by all with the following notations.
1. Not all things are equally clear to all. Matters of society, context, culture, etc., often affect our view of the Bible and other things. However the great truths of God: His work, His character, His plan, etc, are apparent and available to all who will hear (or see!)..the redemptive work is almost simplistic in expression (John 1:12-13).
  2. The secret things belong to God, we are told (Deuteronomy 29:29) but to us there is an abundance or relevant and directive information: the Ten Commandments, for example, or the Sermon on the Mount or the instructions in 1 Peter 2, etc.

### **III. More Direct Helps for Understanding**

- A. Read the Bible as a narrative...for the moment, don't hunt, pick and choose or grab random passages. Read it as a narrative, a continuous account of the revelation given by God to man.
1. The Material content may be summarized as history, prophecy and litany. In these categories one will find biography, legal strictures, military accounts, songs and worship occasions, etc. The Bible is a gold mine of material touching on almost every area of life.
  2. Get an understanding of the major divisions: The Old Testament.
    - a. The Old Testament gives the history of redemption in that God created man and provided for him a means to live in fellowship with God forever. This is done through the choosing of a people to represent Him and that through that people all the world would be blessed.
    - b. The Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) tells how God created and then selected a witness and ordered its life.



- c. The Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings as well as the major and minor prophets, constitute a corps of literature based on truths laid down in the Pentateuch (the Law) and by this tracks the national and religious development of God's people.
  - d. The Sacred writings (Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Ruth, Song of Solomon, Daniel, Lamentations, and Chronicles) give spiritual information about God's providence, deliverance and worship
  - e. And remember:
    - (1) Historical accounts have information past, present, and future. Often past events are cited to encourage present action and prepare for the future.
    - (2) Spiritual lessons may be gleaned from any part of Scripture...but they must be consistent with the totality of Scripture and this takes some work.
    - (3) All of Scripture is written for us but not all is written to us. This is a very important matter and is usually clear in the context or presentation of a passage.
3. Get an understanding of the Major Divisions: the New Testament.
- a. Here we have the history of redemption through the establishment of the church by virtue of the work of the Lord Jesus.
  - b. The Gospels (there is only one but the four writers who wrote of the life of our Lord have the term associated with their names) stress His coming, teaching, life, death, resurrection, ascension, etc.
  - c. The Book of Acts gives an account of how the Holy Spirit gave life and direction to the church.
  - d. The Epistles give directions of life and order in all areas pertinent
  - e. The Revelation gives a picture of the end (eschatology) and the glorification of the Lord Jesus with the completion of His people.

- B. Trust the Bible as a teacher, guide and source of spiritual vitality.
- 1. Watch for promises and warnings

2. Watch for personal direction and group order
3. Watch for instruction in the immediate areas of life.

C. Some quick notes on helpful books...

#### **IV. How Can We Understand the Bible?**

- A. Read it respectfully
- B. Pay attention to the context of the reading of any portion
- C. Pray
- D. Keep a book of spiritual blessings derived from your reading.
- E. Keep a list of questions of perplexing affairs. Don't be afraid to ask others or to consult a book
- F. Accept its authority in matters you can understand and in matters you cannot understand, wait, ask and---maybe it is something your really don't need to know!
- F. Finally there are some passages that are hard for all scholars. Our minds are limited in many ways (I still have trouble working with this computer!) But one does not believe on the basis of understanding....one believes on the basis of trust...and with trust better understanding often comes (Hebrews 11)

*Looking ahead to our next study...we will try to work with the concept of how we understand prophecy, poetry and speech figures that enrich the language of the Bible and sometimes perplex us. This, too, will be something of a whirlwind discussion, but if you are still alive after this quick trip today I hope to see you next week as well. I think I failed to mention earlier in these notes that my name is Tom Taylor and I am thankful to be able to study these things while admitting that I, too, am learning...and there are times when the process is very slow.*

# HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE BIBLE

## PART TWO

### *Particular Hermeneutics*

*Hermeneutics is the science of interpretation. I would prefer a smaller term but it is necessary to use these academic designations to establish the fact of one's education! Our study in understanding the Bible covered (in a very quick way) some of the basics. From those general subjects we move to special areas and suggest things that help us understand them better. Our discussion will touch on poetry, prophecy, allegory and a few speech figures. Some notes will be presented about biographical excerpts and historic settings. It probably sounds like a lot but the discussions cannot be detailed and other information sources will be suggested. Our outlining and numbering scheme continues on the order established in Part One and this is now.....*

### V. Understanding Hebrew Poetry

There is some poetry in the New Testament but it is small in the total amount of things and the great mass of Biblical poetry is in the Old Testament. The poetry of a Greek derivation is close enough to our own understanding that we do not need to say much about it...in fact, when most of us read the New Testament we are not even aware it is there unless we are using a study Bible that alerts us to such things. But in the Old Testament it is very different.

#### A. Notes on the Poetic Sections

1. Much of the prophetic literature is in a poetic mode. To see this touched on in dramatic fashion, consult the commentary on Isaiah by F. C. Jennings. There are also considerable poetic segments in the historic accounts (the Song of Moses and Miriam, the Song of Deborah, etc)
2. But the more formal poetic sections are the books of poetry: Job, Psalms, Proverbs. These are the demonstrable poetic sections and need the greatest attention. Some poetry is found in almost all of the other books....the Hebrews were a singing people.
3. In my discussions I will use some common terms that are not all equally popular with the scholars but they are of historic identification and we can use them...as we like

#### B. A word about Hebrew Poetry.



1. It is not a matter of rime
2. It does have a cadence (or something like that) ---more a rhythm based on syllable stress but unless one reads Hebrew this means nothing to one in understanding.
3. It delights in repetition of ideals and content. This is called "parallelism" although other terms are used and it is a deeply discussed concept but the general ideas are as follow:
  - a. Synonymous parallelism involves the general repetition without adding anything to the original idea although the words might change. Note Psalm 24;1-3 as a general example.
  - b. Synthetic parallelism involves the general repetition with added content to the body. Psalm 19;7-9
  - c. Antithetical parallelism involves a reversal of the ideals as in Psalm 1:6 *I should note that I am using the King James version wording for these examples.*

These ideas are found throughout the poetic structures and in Proverbs there is some diversity but it is too technical for this brief analysis.

All of these features are intended to make the reader more aware of the text. I apologize that I cannot go into further detail...most Psalm commentaries that are based on a Hebrew text will delineate them....Bullinger in the Companion Bible probably does the best total job in defining and demonstrating. But the idea is to make one aware of the text! Many prominent speech figures work to this end as well...the most obvious ones, likely are those that work in the anthropomorphic patterns...describing God and His actions in human terms (Ps 32: "day and night your hand was heavy on me")

4. A didactic tone: teaching something rather than reviewing an event. The historic psalms are an exception but generally the psalmist is interested in a lesson more than the historic details...Psalm 51 for example where the teaching lesson is magnified and the historic details are peripheral. In this area look for the practical lessons and when you see one or many have your notebook handy to write down the reference and the point. Be sure to read the superscriptions as they occur. There is some argument about them but they are often helpful.

- C. When reading Proverbs, watch for key words such as knowledge, wisdom, learning, fool, etc. Keep an eye out for contrasts as may be seen with phrases such as:

wise and foolish  
wicked and righteous  
rich and poor  
obedient child, disobedient child, etc.

Remember that the aphorisms (maxims, etc) are general principles and not specific promises (15:1, for instance). The parallelism of the psalms will also be seen in Proverbs. If you have a center column reference Bible you will be able to see a great many citations from Proverbs in the New Testament.

## **VI. Looking at Prophecy**

- A. Prophecy is the institution of declaring truth or the will of God or simply speaking on God's behalf in a revelatory manner. (These definitions tire me!) A number of factors are important in the study of prophecy.
1. Locate the text and separate the prophetic message from non-related portions.
  2. Distinguish prediction from prescription
  3. Determine local and universal elements
  4. Observe conditional elements....some are expressed, some implied. (Jonah, for example...predicts Ninevah will be destroyed in 40 days...he says nothing about repentance, but when repentance occurs, the destruction is avoided.)
  5. Study perspective....when are the events described to take place? Are they in a chronological order? A practical order? A wait and see order?
  6. Is there a prophetic sign? The sign is usually a short term indication that shows the correctness of the major prophesy. (1 Kings 13----the ruined altar is the sign, the prophesy is about something that will happen nearly 400 years later.)
  7. Distinguish between true and false prophets. Deuteronomy 13 and 18.

The great bulk of the prophetic literature is prescriptive...telling God's people (and sometimes others) what to do. The predictive affairs are to indicate the truthfulness of the prophet as well as to provide a guide for further action. Prophecy is to draw us to do the will of God...not to allow us to draw a calendar of events.



## **VII. Biblical Allegories**

- A. An allegory is an account told to bring light to another matter that in most cases is not identified. An allegory is a double meaning device. It may be a factual matter or one of fiction although these are limited in the bible---but see Judges 9:7-17. The allegory cannot be taken at face value...it must be viewed in the light of what it is characterizing.
- B. The prophets often use allegory to talk of God's work with His people. See Isaiah 5, Ezekiel 17, etc. One must be careful in this for allegorizing is a popularizing medium and there is a tendency to give every thing a second meaning for the sake of common interest. The allegory should be apparent, perhaps through contradictory language (calling Nebuchadnezzar an eagle, for instance, or, in the New Testament, calling Herod a fox) or an impossible imagery (Judges9).
- C. Some theologians make allegory the standard interpretation. We think literal is the standard and allegory is used when a hidden or covered message is necessary. It is a hot issue in Biblical study at all times and was a favorite idea of many of the church fathers since it allowed them to explain things they otherwise did not comprehend. You simply said it is an allegory and it means this....something that might be only marginally attached to the text of their study.
- D. But there is enough allegory in the Bible to make a strong case for its usage. However, to understand the Bible do not begin with allegory....take it when it is demanded and stick with the issue it is describing. Allegory is to be the servant, not the master.

## **VIII. On Parables and Metaphors**

- A. The parable is a stated comparison (identified with the use of "like" or "as"...or compatible expressions. The point it is making is what must determine. Do not try to identify and apply all parts. If the text identifies some or all...that is another matter. And even when the parts are identified, the key is the point to be made in the comparison.
- B. A metaphor is an implied comparison and therefore a short form of allegory.

Of the many other speech or language devices...another course is due.

### **IX. Biographical and Historical Settings**

- A. Study the lives as given--not so that we can live as they did or repeat their lives--but so that we can see how they were useful to God or detrimental to the testimony. The only perfect life in Scripture is that of the Lord Jesus. For both of these items consider Romans 15:4 and 1 Corinthians 10
- B. Study the historical sections to see lessons of fidelity and encouragement as well as challenge and direction. Try 2 Chronicles 20 but there are many of them and they all point to the dependence we owe to the Lord and the thankfulness that should be ours in the light of His Providence.

### **X. Conclusion**

This has been a very hurried study and is mostly suggestive as to how we can understand the Bible. In conclusion of all the ideas together:

- Make sure you have a good study Bible and a simple text Bible. The latter for reading in narrative fashion...the former for getting the ideas and suggestions of editors and scholars. Never allow these to replace your own reading and study but take advantage of them.
- View understanding as a practical experience. One may not have the desired grip today but more light is always available. Continue to read, study, and pray.
- There are, in light of this, different levels of perception...they come with growth, experience, and learning.
- The Holy Spirit is the infallible teacher but the Spirit works with students of whom some are in kindergarten while others are in graduate school and some are in all levels in between. This, friends, is a bit of allegory and as one continues to study and submit to the Word, one grows in understanding and application.
- So remember that whatever you know, stay humble! Knowledge tends to puff up and that is disastrous. Whatever we have we have received and need to be thankful. Use your understanding, whatever it is, to edify others...never to abuse others or to feel superior. There is enough that none of us knows to keep us all humble and dependent.



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# Maxwell's Hebrew style

accent marks and vowels

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x v x

Proverbs  
4:23

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51,  
52,  
142

105  
107, 8, 10,  
21,  
31,

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Song of  
Solomon  
speech figure 4:15

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Gal 4



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The Allegor

Abraham

2 sons

one of the bond women

Ismael

Mt. Sinai

Jerusalem

her children

they

the conflict  
the resolution

one of the free

Isaac

Jerusalem

the free

mother of us  
all

we