

How Should we Read, Interpret, and Apply God's Word?
Part Three

How should we Interpret the Bible?
An Overview of 12 Foundational Principles of Interpretation

Here we continue in our analysis of 12 foundational principles of interpretation . . .

(10) The crucial role of Context

a. The nature and function of context

1) immediate context

- a) what precedes (antecedent)
- b) what follows (subsequent)

Examples: Matt. 7:1-5 and 7:6; Matt. 18:15-20; Rom. 12:17-21 and Rom. 13:1-6; Rom. 14:23; 1 Cor. 11 ("unworthily"); 2 Cor. 8:9; 1 Thess. 5:19-22; 2 John 10.

2) remote context

- a) in the same book

Consider the case of Matthew 25:40 where Jesus says: "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me." Typically people take this to mean that the "least of these my brothers" who are described in the preceding context as "strangers" who come to us "naked" or "sick" or "hungry" or "thirsty" are any persons in need, and that the proof of our salvation is that we are quick to provide them with whatever help they need.

But when one examines the larger context of the entire Gospel of Matthew one discovers that "the least of these my brothers" is a reference to those who do the will of Jesus (Matt. 12:48-50). They are his disciples (23:8). They are not people in general but the disciples/missionaries of Jesus in particular who have suffered because of their sacrifice to bring others the gospel.

- b) in other writings of the same author

3) historical context (time when written; e.g., the book of Revelation)

4) literary context (type of literature)

5) absence of context (Proverbs)

b. Contextual connections

1) types of contextual connections

- a) purely historical (Matt. 3:13-17 and 4:1-11)

b) historical/dogmatic (when doctrinal discourse or teaching is connected with a historical fact; cf. John 6:1-14, 26-65).

c) logical (1 Cor. 15:2 and 15:12-19)

d) ethical (Eph. 1:1-3:21 and Eph. 4:1ff.)

e) psychological (something in the preceding context triggers a related idea; results in parenthesis, etc.)

2) determining contextual connections

a) pay close attention to conjunctions (but, since, therefore, because, now, however, etc.)

b) seek the nearest possible connection

c) watch for recurring words, phrases, themes

d) watch for

1 - parentheses (Eph. 3:1 / 3:14)

2 - digressions (Heb. 5:10-7:1)

3 - anacolutha (Rom. 5:12 / 5:18)

e) identify the natural divisions of the text (not necessarily those in your English version; cf. 1 Thess. 2:17-3:10; Rom. 8-9)

(11) The critical importance of historical-cultural analysis

1. Who is the author?

2. What do we know about his background, education, life in general, etc.?

3. Where was he when he wrote this text? Does the provenance of the book affect its interpretation?

4. What were his circumstances when he wrote this text?

5. When did he write this text?

6. Who are the recipients (addressees) of this text?

Jewish? Gentile? Mixed? Saved? Unsaved? Mature? Immature? Slaves? Freemen? Consider how this question enables us to properly interpret Revelation 3:20.

7. Where do they live?

8. What factors in their place of residence might influence what the author would say to them and how they might hear what he says?

* *Political situation* - Free? Oppressed? Persecuted? Prospering? Roman rule?

* *Economic situation* - Rich? Poor? Middle class?

* *Religious situation* - Is it a pagan environment? Is it a large or small Christian community? What are the prominent and influential theological/religious/philosophical ideas in circulation?

* *Unique social customs* - Family customs (marriage and educational practices); material customs (homes, clothing); daily customs (hygiene, food); athletics and recreation; music and art.

* *Unique geographical features* (see below on Laodicea!)

9. What is the relationship between the author and those to whom he writes? For example, Paul had never been to Colossae and did not know those to whom he wrote, whereas he was extremely familiar with the Christians in Corinth, having spent at least 18 months in the city.

10. What were the circumstances, needs, or events that occasioned the text?

11. Identify any other significant people, places, or events mentioned in the rest of the book.

Some examples of how historical and cultural phenomena affect the exegesis and interpretation of a text:

Matthew 24 (cf. Luke 21:20-24)

The way one understands the second coming of Christ, as well as the relationship between Israel and the Church, is greatly dependent on the significance given to the destruction of Jerusalem in a.d. 70. How much, if any, of the *Olivet Discourse* in Matthew refers, not to the end of the age, but to the invasion of Jerusalem by the Roman general Titus and the subsequent destruction of the Temple and dispersion of the Jews? An acquaintance with the details of what happened in a.d. 70 (largely from the writings of Josephus, an eye-witness to the events) will touch on how one exegetes the discourse.

John 2

Familiarity with the customs relating to a marriage ceremony sheds considerable light on the interpretation of John 2:1-11. We know, for example, that the wedding itself was preceded by a betrothal that was regarded as both solemn and binding. In first century Palestine, breaking the betrothal was tantamount to divorce.

The day of a wedding was always Wednesday if the bride was a virgin and Thursday if she was a widow. The first step was the procession of the bridegroom and his friends to the home of the bride. The actual ceremony took place inside the bride's home. This was followed by another procession in which the party returned to the home of the bridegroom. It was here that the marriage feast was held, a lengthy affair that might go on for as much as a week.

Leon Morris provides this additional and important insight: "One thing that seems strange to us is that there was a strong element of reciprocity. If one gave a feast of such and such a quality (and quantity!) when his son was married, he was entitled to an equivalent when his neighbor's son was married. If the neighbor did not provide it, he could be taken to court and sued; a wedding feast was not simply a social occasion, but involved a legal obligation. This is important for our present study. It is quite possible that the bridegroom of John 2 and his family were financially unable to provide all that was necessary for the wedding feast. It is often said that it is unlikely that Jesus would have performed a miracle like this simply to rescue people from a minor social embarrassment. Quite so. But it may well have been much more than that. It may be that Jesus rescued a young couple from a financial liability that would have crippled them economically for years."

John 7

Understanding the Jewish background to John 7:37-44 is crucial to a proper interpretation of the text.

Feast of Tabernacles - In early fall, after the harvest, for 7 days in Jerusalem the people relaxed and rejoiced, living in booths or tabernacles made of leaves and branches (Lev. 23:39-44). The events of the 7th day are important. In your right hand you would carry a *lulabha* = a branch from a myrtle tree, one from a willow, and another from a palm tree, all tied together. In your left hand you would carry a *citron* (a lemon like fruit). One of the priests would then take in hand a golden pitcher and lead you and the others in festive procession to the accompaniment of flutes and trumpets to the pool of Siloam, the crowd all the while dancing and singing and rejoicing. The priest would fill the pitcher with

water from the pool and then lead the worshipping parade back to the Temple. He would pour the water into a funnel which led to the base of the altar. Then, to the accompaniment of the flute, shaking in the right hand the *lulabha* and with fruit in the left, all the people would chant, antiphonally, Psalms 113-118, climaxing with the public recitation of Ps. 118:24-29.

The symbolic purpose of the water-ritual was to remind the people of the provision of water from God during the time of wilderness wandering (see Num. 20:7-11; Neh. 9:15,19-20; Isa. 12:3).

It was at that precise moment that a man from Nazareth stood up from a visible and prominent place and cried aloud: *"If any man is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture said, 'from his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water'"* (vv. 37-38).

In other words, Jesus was saying: "This feast is all about **me**. The water in the golden pitcher points to **me**. The water that flowed from the rock in the wilderness was **me**. The promise of refreshing waters of salvation refers to **me**. The water I offer is **better** than that which flowed from the rock, **better** than that which falls from heaven to nourish your crops, **better** than that just taken from the pool of Siloam. **I am** the water that gives **eternal** life, **eternal** refreshment, **eternal** joy. Come and drink of **me**."

1 Corinthians 1

The meaning of the cross is greatly enhanced when one understands the reason for the opposition to the idea of a crucified Messiah. The cross was foolishness and a stumbling-block, not because it was intellectually or logically or even theologically objectionable, but because it was aesthetically and morally repugnant. The cross was a visible token of one of the ancient world's most repulsive obscenities. To suggest that salvation and the forgiveness of sins are available through faith in a Messiah who died on a **cross** was the height of folly.

1 Corinthians 9

Central to the interpretation of 1 Cor. 9:24-27 is an understanding of the Isthmian Games (second only to the Olympic Games in Athens; they were held approximately 15 miles from Corinth, every two years). Much of Paul's imagery here is derived from his own eyewitness experience of that athletic event.

1 Corinthians 11

One cannot expect to understand the meaning or contemporary significance of 1 Cor. 11:1-16 apart from insight into the "veiling" customs among women in both Jewish and Greco-Roman culture.

2 Corinthians (and its relation to 1 Corinthians)

Basic to our ability to make sense of 2 Corinthians is knowledge of Paul's complex relationship with the church in Corinth, his visits to that city, and especially the two letters he wrote to them, neither of which has survived (in other words, Paul actually wrote **four** letters to the Corinthians, only two of which are canonical).

Colossians 1:16-17

In this text Paul asserts not only that the Son of God created all things, but that he also continually preserves and sustains all things. "In him," says Paul, "all things hold together" (v. 17b).

We have well-documented evidence (see O'Brien, xxvi) that Colossae was situated in an area of repeated earthquake activity, and that a major quake had virtually destroyed the city in a.d. 60-61. This geographical fact undoubtedly was experienced and interpreted in a different light, given what Paul says in v. 17 of the providential sovereignty of Christ over the natural world.

1 Timothy 2:8ff.

Exegesis of this paragraph will be radically affected by what we know of ancient customs regarding women's clothing as well as the educational opportunities available to them and the role of women in society in general.

2 Timothy (and Paul's imprisonment)

Knowing that Paul wrote this letter from a Roman dungeon, perhaps only days before his execution, gives new meaning to several of his statements and exhortations.

Hebrews (from whom? to whom?)

Although it is less important to know from whom, it is vital to know **to whom** the epistle to the Hebrews was addressed. Whether these exhortations were addressed primarily to Jewish or Gentile believers or a mixed congregation, whether to mature or immature Christians, are questions of great import in the understanding of many of its difficult passages.

Revelation 2-3

Acquaintance with a map of the ancient world often greatly aids the interpreter. For example, a quick look at the seven churches of Rev. 2-3 reveals that they were most likely addressed in the order in which we find them, not because they were prophetic of consecutive ages in the unfolding history of the church at large, but because this is the geographical order in which they would be encountered by anyone traveling in that region of the world. They formed a natural trade route by virtue of their geographic relation one to another.

Or consider the controversial words of Jesus to the church at Laodicea - "I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth" (Rev. 3:15-16).

It makes perfectly good sense that Jesus would prefer the Laodiceans (and all of us) to be "hot" rather than "lukewarm." But how could he possibly say that being "lukewarm" is worse than being "cold"? Doesn't this put Jesus in the position of affirming the indifferent pagan over the backslidden, half-hearted Christian? Granted, the latter is bad, but is it really the case that Jesus would prefer his lukewarm people to be in blatant unbelief?

Then there is the rather revolting image of Jesus spitting the Laodicean church out of his mouth. The marginal reference in the NASV indicates that "vomit" is actually the more literal meaning of this word. Notwithstanding the numerous threats of discipline and judgment throughout these seven letters, there's something about Jesus being sickened to the point of vomiting his people out of his mouth that strikes us as uncharacteristically unseemly.

Our Lord's diagnosis of the problem in Laodicea is two-fold. He first discerns a moral and religious tepidity in the church, a lukewarmness that borders on outright indifference to the things of God and a life of godliness. Second, he traces this to a prideful self-sufficiency (v. 17).

To come straight to the point, Christianity at Laodicea was flabby and anemic! Our Lord uses the language of "cold," "hot," and "lukewarm" What does he mean by this?

People have typically believed that by "hot" Jesus is referring to zealous, lively, passionate, hard-working Christians, and that by "cold" he is referring to unregenerate pagans, devoid of any spiritual life whatsoever. *Hot*, so goes the argument, refers to spiritually active believers whereas *cold* refers to apathetic unbelievers. But this creates the problem of Jesus appearing to say he would rather they be in utter unbelief than in a backslidden, albeit still saved, condition.

The key to making sense of this comes from an understanding of certain features of the *topography* of the land in which the Laodiceans found themselves.

We must remember that Laodicea was only six miles south of Hierapolis and eleven miles west of Colossae. These three cities were the most important of all in the Lycus Valley. Laodicea itself lacked a natural water supply and was dependent on its neighbors for this vital resource. This, I believe, explains the imagery in this remarkable passage.

In all likelihood, “hot” and “cold” don’t refer to the spiritual “temperature” or religious “mood” or “attitude”, as it were, of the believer and the unbeliever, as has traditionally been thought. Rather, the word “hot” refers to the well-known medicinal waters of Hierapolis, whose “hot springs” reached 95 degrees. The word “cold”, on the other hand, points to the refreshing waters of Colossae.

If this is what Jesus had in mind, “the church is not being called to task for its spiritual temperature but for the *barrenness* of its works” (Mounce, 125-26). The church was providing neither *refreshment* for the spiritually weary (portrayed through the imagery of “cold” water from Colossae), nor *healing* for the spiritually sick (portrayed through the imagery of “hot” water from Hierapolis). The church was simply ineffective and thus distasteful to the Lord.

If correct, this relieves the problem of why Christ would prefer the church to be “cold” rather than “lukewarm”. The church in Laodicea is rebuked, therefore, for the *useless and barren nature of its works, indicative of its stagnant spiritual condition*. “You’ve become of no benefit to anyone,” says Jesus, “and I will not stomach such behavior.”

One doesn’t like to think of professing Christians on whose hearts Jesus rests lightly, but the Laodiceans fit the bill. This isn’t to say they weren’t a passionate people; only that the focus of their dedication was something other than the Lord Jesus Christ. They probably burned with desire, just not for him.

The topography of the region also sheds light on his use of the word “lukewarm”. This is probably another allusion to the hot springs of Hierapolis, located just six miles north of Laodicea. As the hot, mineral-laden waters traveled across the plateau towards Laodicea, they gradually became lukewarm before cascading over the edge directly in view of the Laodicean populace.

There are actually archaeological remains in Laodicea of an aqueduct system that would have carried water from Hierapolis. The people in Laodicea would have been keenly aware of the nauseating effect of drinking from that source.

“*That* is what you are like to me,” says Jesus. “When I look upon your lack of zeal, your indifference toward the needs of others, and your blasé response to my beauty, I feel like a man who has over imbibed on tepid, tasteless water.” It’s difficult to rid one’s mind of the picture of Jesus lifting to his lips a cup of what he anticipates to be a flavorful and refreshing drink, only to regurgitate it in wholesale disgust.

(12) Principles that govern the interpretation of the Pauline Epistles

[The best treatment of genre as it relates to the Pauline literature is Tom Schreiner's book, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles* (Baker, 1990).]

1. Are Paul's writings *Letters* or *Epistles*?

The distinction is this: *epistles*, so goes the argument, were carefully crafted literary works intended for a wider public, with a view to being preserved for posterity; letters, on the other hand, were hurriedly sent to address specific situations or problems and were not intended by their author to be refined, literary compositions.

This distinction can be taken too far. Whereas Paul's writings were indeed *occasional* (they were 'occasioned' by some special circumstance either in the life of the author or the addressees), they were "not merely private individual letters. Paul wrote them as an apostle, and he expected them to be read in and obeyed by the Christian community (1 Cor. 14:37; 1 Thess. 5:27; 2 Thess. 3:14). Indeed, even though Colossians addressed a specific situation, Paul thought its message would be helpful to the Laodiceans (Col. 4:16). Apparently Paul believed that his specific and occasional instructions for the Colossians had a wider significance so that his words were relevant not only for the Colossians but also for the Laodiceans. Furthermore, at times Paul clearly said that his words were in fact the very word of God (1 Cor. 14:37-38; see Gal. 1:8). He did not conceive of his letters as mere human advice (see 1 Thess. 2:13). Thus, the letters had a normative and authoritative status from the beginning (which is perhaps why they were preserved), and letters written to particular communities could apply to other churches as well" (Schreiner, 25).

2. What is the *structure* of Paul's epistles?

a. the opening

- 1) sender
- 2) addressees
- 3) salutation
- 4) prayer

[There is no observable transition in Colossians from the opening to the body.]

[One interesting example is 3 John 2, where John opens his epistle with these words: "Beloved, I pray that in all respects you may prosper and be in good health, just as your soul prospers." Some who advocate a health and wealth gospel have tried to derive more from this verse than is proper. What we have in this verse is simply a standard form of greeting found in most letters of the ancient world. Gordon Fee reminds us that "just as there is a standard form to our letters (date, salutation, body, close, and signature), so there was for theirs. Thousands of ancient letters have been found, and most of them have a form exactly like those in the New Testament" (*How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 44). Furthermore, as I. H. Marshall has pointed out, "the phrase would be perfectly possible in a letter to somebody with robust health, that he may continue to enjoy it" (*The Epistles of John*, 83). In other words, one of the standard elements of this genre of literature is the **health-wish**, such as we find in 3 John 2. An understanding of this can protect us from building doctrines on a shaky exegetical foundation. See also Raymond E. Brown, "Appendix V: General Observations on Epistolary Format" in *The Epistles of John*.]

b. the body

c. the closing

Paul closes his letters with such items as: travel plans, his personal situation, brief prayer, prayer requests, praise of his fellow workers, greetings to friends, final instructions, brief exhortations, and a "grace" to you benediction.

3. **What are the characteristic features of Paul's epistles?**

a. introductory formulas

Paul's letters often begin with certain phrases, two of which are *disclosure* formulas ("I do not want you to be ignorant" [Rom. 1:13], "Now I want you to know brothers" [Phil. 1:12]; and *request* formulas ("Now I exhort you" [1 Cor. 1:10], "Now we ask you brethren" [2 Thess. 2:1]).

b. diatribe

"The characteristic feature of the diatribe is its conversational nature. The teacher (or writer) anticipates a possible objection or response to his argument, and puts the question or objection in the student's words and responds to it" (Schreiner, 36). For example, see Rom. 2:25-3:2; Rom. 5:20-6:1. On occasion Paul addresses his opponent with a direct statement, as in Rom.2:4; 9:20.

c. parenesis

Parenesis, or exhortations, are pervasive in Paul's writings. E.g., virtually all of 1 Thessalonians is paranetic. In Romans, the paranetic section is found in 12:1-15:13. See also Gal. 5:13-6:10; Eph. 4:1-6:20; Col. 3:1-4:6.

d. hymns and confessional statements

See Eph. 5:14; Phil. 2:6-11; Col. 1:15-20; 1 Tim. 3:16.

e. the occasional nature of Paul's writings

Aside from Romans (and perhaps Ephesians), Paul's letters "are not systematic treatises that were intended to present a complete Christian theology. They are pastoral works in which Paul applied his theology to specific problems in the churches" (Schreiner, 41-42). Examples: Galatians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Philippians and the Pastoral Epistles.

Question: While recognizing the occasional nature of Paul's letters, how does one know if Paul is responding to a problem in the congregation or whether it is simply a part of the argument? Schreiner suggests two guidelines:

First, "the interpreter should ask, Did Paul say anything *explicitly* about the opponents in his letter?" (46)

Second, "if Paul *frequently* mentions a particular issue, and does so with *urgency* and *clarity*, then one may justly conclude that he is speaking against opponents" (46).

Addendum

The role of the *Holy Spirit* in our interpretation of the biblical text. See, for example, Psalm 119:18; Luke 24:27-22; John 14:25-26(?); 1 Corinthians 2:12-16; Ephesians 1:15-23; Philippians 3:15(?); Colossians 1:9-10(?); 2 Timothy 2:7; 1 John 2:20,28.

Discussion Questions

- (1) How does the context of Revelation 3:10 help us understand this promise? Does the fact that Jesus was speaking to first-century Christians in Philadelphia make a difference in how you understand the passage?
- (2) Can you give some examples, aside from those listed in the notes, where an understanding of the cultural and historical circumstances of a passage sheds light on its meaning?
- (3) How important is it to know who are the recipients (addressees) of a biblical text? Why is it important to know whether or not the recipients are Jewish, Gentile, mixed, saved, unsaved, mature, immature, slaves, or freemen? How does this question affect the way you read and interpret the book of Hebrews?
- (4) In what ways does an understanding of the personal relationship between Paul and the Corinthians shed light on both of his letters to that church?
- (5) Go back and reflect on each of the specific texts cited in the notes in which an understanding of the context and historical/cultural background sheds light on their meaning. Do you agree with the observations that were made in the notes?